

DOCTORAL THESIS

British Chekhov: an analysis of the United Kingdom's 21st century national identity through contemporary reinterpretations of Anton Chekhov's plays

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**British Chekhov: an analysis of the United Kingdom's 21st century national
identity through contemporary reinterpretations of Anton Chekhov's plays**

by

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Abstract

This thesis is a socio-political analysis of the United Kingdom's contemporary national identity, as expressed through an intercultural examination of eight Anton Chekhov's productions presented in the country between 2009 and 2011, characterised by their aesthetic and socio-political diversity. The introduction presents a theoretical exploration and definition of the notions of interculturalism and national identity, which serve as the theoretical pillars of this work. A historical contextualisation summarises the reception, assimilation and reinterpretation processes of British Chekhovian discourses from the early 20th century onwards, as well as the urban and regional transformations that the country experienced during the same time frame. The first chapter explores traditional views of national identity through the analysis of double-bill performances, connecting Chekhov's pieces to 'national' works by Terence Rattigan and William Shakespeare. The second chapter discusses international discourses and their influence in the creation of local imaginaries, using foreign Chekhovian productions presented on the British stage to scrutinise reception processes, importation models and the power of sponsors and festivals. The third chapter approaches Scottish and female discourses, emphasising their 'otherness' and value in the construction of more plural notions of national identity, through rewritings of the Russian author done by playwrights born and raised within the UK. The fourth chapter reflects on politically progressive and intercultural understandings of nation through new British experimental performances inspired by Chekhov's iconographies and symbolisms. Finally, the conclusion re-examines Chekhovian dramaturgy, national identity and interculturalism, proposing an abstract outline to understand processes of reception, assimilation and/or reinterpretation of foreign dramatic discourses within any given geographical construct, and highlighting the importance of building a plural and hybrid post-Brexit British society, focused on a constant intercultural negotiation between superimposing cultural forces.

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Introduction

1. British national identity and interculturalism through Anton Chekhov: a theoretical framework

In May 2010, the Brighton Festival premiered *Before I Sleep*, a site-responsive production commissioned to the theatre company dreamthinkspeak, inspired by Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and set in an abandoned department store. The troupe, created in 1999 by director Tristan Sharps, had a long history of collaboration with the city and its yearly theatrical event, starting with the 2001 "deconstructed version of Shakespeare's HAMLET" *Who Goes There* (dreamthinkspeak, 2001); the Chekhovian adaptation, based on the reputation built by this and other shows, managed to surpass all expectations and eventually became "the biggest selling production in the history of the Brighton Festival and Dome", with its running extended –for the first time ever– months "beyond the Festival" and finally "seen by 21,000 people" (dreamthinkspeak, 2010). This degree of success was even more remarkable when considering that, instead of a more lineal or 'traditional' tone, an abstract and immersive theatrical experience was proposed, filled with silent and melancholy dramatic sketches, art performances, beautifully-lit rooms, projections and a vast array of objects that carried symbolic meanings. Ticket-holders were allowed to wander around without time constraints or a specific linear path, offering them the opportunity to explore a building that, between its opening in "12 September 1931" and its closure in 2007, had been "the largest department store in Brighton" and an integral part of the "growth of the cooperative movement" during the 1920s and 1930s (Carder, 1990). It was, in other words, a derelict symbol of a past era that, when combined with the visual imagination and sense of adventure of the show, served as a rich vessel for issues such as national identity, memory and socio-political transformations.

The fact that the dilapidated building possessed many symbolisms implied by the cherry orchard in the original 1904 play also reflected, in the 150th anniversary of his birth, the long lasting strength of Chekhov's dramas inside the realm of British theatre.¹ Beyond a respect for his dramatic achievements, and his position as a canonical author inside Western drama's history, his recurrent presence on the national stage has come to represent an element that will be central to the present work: the complex and ever-changing transformations of the country's notion of *national identity*. This might seem, at first sight, a strange proposition: the creations of a 'foreign' writer, who only managed to complete some comic one-act satires and a handful of full-length plays before his untimely death from tuberculosis in 1904 at the age of 44, do not seem to be after all ideal candidates to represent the country in the same way as, say, the historical dramas of Shakespeare or the 'comedies of menace' by Pinter. Due to his origin, how could his dramas embrace the diversities of a society that, among other important factors, is still trying to balance its Imperial past and a present of diverse and clashing voices? The answer lies, first, in the way this question paralleled Russia's situation at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, when Chekhov's original writing took place (one of many connections between Russia and the United Kingdom [UK] that will be developed throughout the present work); and second, in a process of assimilation that embraced the social analysis and the polyphonic constructions present in the original works of the Russian writer and turned them in the past 80 years into expressions of British politic-aesthetic tensions, presenting on stage the uneasy relationships between the discourses of different historical periods. This was reinforced, perhaps, by their original existence in a different language: in their constant reinterpretations, their transmutations generated by the dissimilar translations used by

¹ The demolition of the building in 2013, retaining only the facade and creating behind a new structure containing "351 student flats" (Brighton Society, 2013), only reinforced the connection with the final chopping of the cherry orchard at the end of the Russian writer's play: a powerful symbol of the past, with all of its challenges and interpretative possibilities, giving way to the needs of younger generations.

successive companies and directors, they kept their freshness, unrestrained by the transformations of language or the sense of 'canonical' respect that a revered English-speaking artist could have produced. Absorbed to an extent by the receiving country, but always in constant textual and visual transformation, these works served (and still serve) to show both classical and new interpretations.

This thesis aims to analyse a series of Chekhovian performances presented at the turn of the first decade of the 21st century (between 2009 and 2011), using them as case-studies to explore three elements: one, the different registers of the British theatrical world, ranging from naturalistic to experimental; two, the degrees of assimilation and interpretation of Chekhovian discourses within the British nation; and three, the urban and regional socio-political transformations that the UK experienced from a socio-political perspective during this time frame, which contextualised many historical developments of the nation during the following five-year period. Due to the cultural and social diversity present in the country, reflected on the stage through a prism of political agendas and individual artistic interests, the proposed analytical reading will be intercultural in nature: rather than merely exploring those shows where actors from different cultures bring their different techniques and merge them in a mutually respectful process, this work will explore with equal respect different dramatic registers, from those based on long-term traditions originated before the fall of Empire to those that are the result of contemporary immigration forces and internal revalidations of multiple notions of 'otherness', emphasising their connections in an intertheatrical ebb and flow of interdependence and influence.² Ultimately, this approach will allow an analytic understanding of the processes of assimilation, reinterpretation and recreation of 'foreign' dramatic discourses within a specific geographic construct (e.g., a nation, a region or a city), thus providing a

² Later in this chapter a more complete description of the term 'intertheatricality' will be provided.

general outline that is expected to be useful for the understanding of any playwright's reception in different societies around the world.

In addition, the analysis will offer a more comprehensive view of the cultural perspectives that compound the country's *national identity*: a rich term that encompasses a variety of voices and forces, and that by itself represents one of the central cores of the present enquiry. In order to at least partly pin down and grasp its complexity, its understanding and connection with the notion of 'Britishness' will be reached through the tight frame of the abovementioned Chekhovian productions—creations inspired by an author who, due to a series of historical processes that turned him into a 'national' symbol that presented many established and/or progressive discourses, is at the end a potentially intercultural figure, capable through his constantly re-interpreted work to build bridges among different aesthetic and cultural perspectives. This is, of course, not necessarily exclusive to Chekhov; a similar exploration, perhaps, could have been done exploring British productions of Ibsen.³ At the end, though, what really matters is the examination of the different notions of national identity *suggested* by the Russian author's plays: the works provide a framework to a relevant discussion on the development of the nation and the communication between its different members that otherwise would be inaccessible in its complexity and vastness.

Before delving into the reasons why the Russian author has acquired such a degree of recognition in the UK, though, and prior to starting the analysis of the selected 2009-2011 productions, it is essential to signal how the theoretical elements mentioned in the previous paragraph—national identity and interculturalism—will be understood. The next two subsections will present a literature

³ It must be pointed out, though, that Chekhov's recurrent depictions of a society that faced contradictory understandings of its imperial past and unstable present, as well as his interest in urban vs. rural clashes, have corresponded with Britain's main concerns when exploring its own evolving national identity.

review of the evolution of the understanding of these two terms, ending with the presentation of the definitions that will be primarily used during the rest of this thesis.

2. Literature review (I): nation and national identity

‘National identity’ is a slippery concept whose signification within the UK, as in every other territory described by its members as a ‘nation’, is today the centre of many discussions: whether through press articles, television programmes or day-to-day conversations, it continues to create heated debates among the population in a context of increasing immigration, globalisation, questions about devolution, belonging to the European Union and economic instability. To discover the historical origins and meanings of these two notions, however, it is first necessary to understand that, despite the fact that both of them are sometimes connected to notions of ‘tradition’, they are relatively recent terms. Hans Kohn, in his now classic book *The Idea of Nationalism* (published in 1944), described how “nationalism as we understand it is no older than the second half of the eighteenth century”, propelled by “the ideas of popular sovereignty (...), a complete revision of the position of ruler and ruled, of classes and castes” that led to a more secular society “with the help of a new natural science and of natural law as understood by Grotius and Locke” (Kohn, 2008: 3). This does not mean that this notion appeared out of nowhere, following an unexpected burst of historical creativity: as Kohn himself pointed out, “like all historical movements, nationalism has its roots deep in the past (...); the conditions which made its emergence possible had matured for centuries before they converged at its formation” (Kohn, 2008: 3). Later theorists of nation, like Anthony D. Smith, pointed out how many latter-day nations “have been formed in the first place around a dominant *ethnie*, which annexed or attracted other *ethnies* or ethnic fragments into the state to which it gave a name and a cultural charter” (Smith, 1991: 39); an example being the “English (Anglo-Norman)

state, which under Edward I (...) expanded into Wales, destroying the Welsh kingdoms and bringing most Welshmen into the realm as a peripheral cultural community under the domination of the English state" (Smith, 1991: 39). Not that this immediately led to the construction of nations: as Timothy Brennan explains in *The National Longing for Form*, with the important precedent of the "Cromwellian forces of the English Civil War", where "the aspirations of the middle classes for 'free expression', 'self-assertion', and freedom" created an incipient "nationalist ethos", only until during the Enlightenment a succession of historical and cultural factors led to the establishment of more coherent and widespread notions of national identity (Brennan, 1993: 52). In his political treatises and essays written in the second half of the 18th century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau first developed the "concept of the collective personality of the 'people', the unity and common destiny of a 'community' whose cohesiveness relied upon forces emanating from the ground up, and which, being natural, encompassed all" (Brennan, 1993: 52): a view that carried an intrinsic ethical connotation and was very much connected to an individual, rational notion of civic duty. In other words, society was still seen more as the result of a rational and conscious decision on the part of the individual to give up some of his freedom in favour of a more cohesive system –the famous 'social contract' proposed in his eponymous 1762 work.

Eventually, though, with the political development of both the American and the French Revolutions, it became necessary for the new emerging societies to find a more emotionally-bonding and 'historical' justification for their recently acquired notions of identity. The Romantic movement took Rousseau's concept and transformed it into what the German poet and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder called the *Volk*, that is, "a woollier insistence on the primordial and ineluctable roots of nationhood as a *distinguishing feature* from other communities" (Brennan, 1999: 53). Many cultures and languages supposedly rested on a mythical, powerful and remote origin; far from being conventions or constructions of overlapping cultures and histories, they

became ‘natural’ features which possessed an “intangible quality” and represented “the spirit of the people” of every geographical region (Brennan, 1993: 53). In the case of what is now known as the UK, the plays by Shakespeare were revitalised and turned into cohesive communal symbols; presumed Celtic rituals and King Arthur’s saga reinforced the myth of a patriarchal, deeply-rooted and monarchist society; and the lauded poets Byron, Coleridge and Wordsworth helped in the “shaping and transmission of a uniquely British ‘structure of feeling’ that would complement the more material policies and practices of the British nation-state throughout the nineteenth century” (Crocco, 2008: 2).⁴ Separate notions of ‘Englishness’, ‘Welshness’ or ‘Scottishness’ became then connected through the all-encompassing view of ‘Britishness’, giving a sense of belonging and pretended unity to communities that, despite their process of political merging started in the eighteenth century, at the same time were building (with different degrees of success) their own local and regional identities. Also, considering the expansion of the British Empire during the entire nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, the emerging nation became both a geographical centre of political control and a generator of a monolithic and powerful discourse that aimed to sustain social stability, political control and certain superiority over conquered states, and to propagate myths “to mitigate or circumvent historic and ongoing divisions within Britain” (Crocco, 2008: 3).

As Robert Winder (2004: 11) described in *Bloody Foreigners*, “a set of manners or codes”, that is, a tapestry of mythologies and historical ‘facts’ that were taken as long-standing truths, were identified from this century onwards as the essence of British identity –a specific example of an approach where nations were considered “a ‘natural’ phenomenon and the primary organising principle

⁴ Despite contemporary attempts to add further layers of subtlety, the present work will suggest that some expressions of this perspective remain in the 21st century. An example is the way the core of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad was named World Shakespeare Festival: an ideological reinforcement of the importance of the English writer, whose image –beyond the inherent aesthetical qualities of the plays– continues to be exalted as the synonym of literary quality, humanistic depth and national power.

throughout the world (...), part of the natural order of things" (Holdsworth, 2010: 12). Added to a gathering of historical and cultural artefacts, originally erroneously identified by archaeologists and anthropologists as the direct ancestors of the then contemporary population of the British Isles, these discourses were used to emphasise what Homi Bhabha (1990: 1) described as "a continuous narrative of national progress, the narcissism of self-generation, the primeval present of the *Volk*": a "cultural compulsion" focused around what he portrays as the "impossible" but pretended "unity of the nation as a symbolic force" (Bhabha, 1990: 1), despite the existence of an "emergent post-colonial world" where the "nation-space" is acquiring a "transnational dimension" (Bhabha, 1990: 6).⁵ This view, despite historical-theoretical developments that will be exposed below, still matters today, as the proclamations and positions of many political parties from all ideological spheres, with their different and sometimes outright opposed views on national identity, testify. The difference lies in the fact that, at least for those aware of the developments of historiography and sociology, these processes are now overtly recognised and critically addressed: a fact initiated by the recovery of the seminal (but for many years underestimated) discourse *What is a nation?*, written by the historian Ernest Renan and first presented in 1882. In it, the French philosopher and writer pointed out how "the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things" (Renan, 1990: 11): a view that contradicted that of the *Volk* in the sense that it suggested that, more than precise ethnic or racial elements, what truly created a community was a number of common agreements among specific gatherings of people, which included the deliberate rejection of any historical facts that could dismantle their newly established

⁵ To reinforce this, under an apparent 'objective' view of history selected events were used as symbolic unifiers of origins and goals. Robert Winder (2004: 21), for example, reveals how "the first appearance of the word 'Celtic' in British political discourse was in 1707, the year of the Act of Union between England and Scotland". The notion of an ancient tribe dominating the British Isles (a contested fact in contemporary archaeological research) was created as a social bonding concept, an edifying concoction useful to strengthen an imagined sense of mythical 'belonging' to the land.

unity. As Ernest Gellner (1987: 8) elaborated a century later, Renan's "main purpose [was] to deny any naturalistic determinism of the boundaries of nations: these are *not* dictated by language, geography, race, religion, or anything else. (...) Nations are made by human will". Through his work, then, a new approach was first implied, even though it was not fully developed: one where the presumed scientific objectivity of the nation-state, emerging and evolving as an 'organism' with an almost Darwinian determination, and based on historically unchangeable facts, was disputed by the possibility that, in order for a society to succeed, minority voices and parallel discourses had to be suppressed or outright removed from the historical strata.

It would take 60 years before Renan's theories could be developed a step further: during the first half of the twentieth century, the notion of nation progressively became one of the most important –and potentially destructive– elements of global development. The irresistible appeal of more 'mystical' theories, with their presumed connection between an ethnic group and a specific geographic territory, led to an identity redefinition that promoted the creation of new independent communities, but also produced the rise of extreme nationalisms that concluded in the excesses of fascism during World War II. Due to this, it was only at the end of this period that new authors and opinions entered the intellectual discourse: as mentioned above, in 1944 Hans Kohn published *The Idea of Nationalism*, where in clear rejection of (and response to) the certitudes that had led to the then so recent confrontations he suggested that "nationalism is first and foremost a state of mind, an act of consciousness, which since the French Revolution has been more and more common to mankind" (Kohn, 2008: 10-11). Although still proposing their origin as the result of certain layers of kinship –such as common descent, language, territory, political entity, customs and traditions, and religion–, he suggested that the ultimate reason for the existence of 'nations' was essentially intellectual, developed as the result of specific historical developments rather than given by a natural, external force. In so doing, his work can be considered as the first one to extensively support

a modern version of the nation, which views it “as originating in the specific economic, social and political material conditions of modernity, and industrialisation in particular” (Holdsworth, 2010: 12). This trend would be continued 40 years later in the work of Ernest Gellner, who in his *Nations and Nationalism* –first published in 1983– proposed that nation was “a contingency, and not an universal necessity” which “is not an inherent attribute of humanity, but it has come to appear as such” (2008: 6). Nationalism, for its part, was a political principle that came out of “a homogeneity imposed by (...) inescapable imperatives” of specific populations (Gellner, 2008: 38) – in other words, it was an element that essentially *preceded* and *supported* the origin of ‘nations’, and without which their creation would have been unthinkable (as opposed to previous writers for whom the nation itself was a mythical and individual presence that had been somehow ‘discovered’ by men). A subtler understanding of the processes of national creation was implied here: one initiated by a political desire that led to the eventual creation of a physical ‘state’. Nation and state became separate elements which nevertheless were “destined for each other”, in a way that “either without the other is incomplete, and constitutes a tragedy” (Gellner, 2008: 6): an oppressed or ‘secondary’ community, according to this example, could have a strong notion of how its own nation should be, but without the administrative policies of a politically active state it would never have the possibility to control its own destiny. Nationalism, according to Gellner, served eventually “to endow a culture with its own political roof” (Gellner, 2008: 42), that is, to preserve an empowering discourse through the creation of a physical social organisation.⁶

The approach implied by Kohn, though, pointed also towards an even more radical proposition: that nations are, by their own essence, nothing else than abstract creations, fruit of a collective

⁶ These concepts are important for the present situation of the UK, as the recurrent independence processes of Scotland reveal. The present work, especially from the second chapter onwards, will recover this division to indicate how the monolithic notion of British national identity is being questioned by complex tensions between internal regions aiming for a wider degree of self-control; the understanding of ‘nation’, however, will implicitly be connected to that of a politically-organized state.

imaginative process. This school of thought, suggested already by Renan's work, was first fully developed in the 1983 book *Imagined Communities*, perhaps the most widely known and quoted contemporary text dealing with ideas on nation. Benedict Anderson (2006: 6-7), the author, advocated there that the concept was "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign (...); *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (...), [and] *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship". This definition was significant in the sense that it openly recognised that societies are not bound or connected only to ethnic or geographical predeterminations, uncovering then the fallacy of their presumed 'unchangeable' nature and the absurdity of the growing confrontations between them under the argument of opposed cultural superiorities. Also, by positioning the origin of these 'imagined communities' as the result of "a half-fortuitous, but explosive, interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity" (Anderson, 2006: 43), Anderson reinforced a political argument where, more than ethnic or racial features, the real igniting force for the national discourse lay in the appearance of cultural and historic developments in each specific society. Using again the example of the UK, its origin would not be found in the presence of previous Anglo-Saxon, Celtic or Roman populations, but in the social developments induced by the Industrial Revolution and the influence of Romantic poetry and novels.

Anderson pushed the boundaries of the modern interpretation of nation, by focusing it on its essentially constructed nature; other contemporary writers shared and/or concurrently developed similar theories, expanding them in slightly different ways due to their own personal interests.

Following a similar train of thought, for example, writer Eric Hobsbawm proposed the notion of 'invented traditions' in his 1983 book *The Invention of Tradition*, describing it as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (Hobsbawm, 2003: 1). This presented a more Marxist approach to the field, where social class conflict and economic competition became the centre of the argument: not only was 'nation' a created imaginary, but it also expressed a series of agendas that aimed to control local populations. In the case of the UK, for example, it could be argued that certain elements like the anthem (appeared in 1740) and the flag (evolved and finished between 1790 and 1794), responded not only to a romantic attempt at stabilising national identity, but were also efforts to propagate monarchical discourses and justify the imperial superiority of the country both on a local and an international scale (Hobsbawm, 2003: 7). As Nadine Holdsworth elaborated, this theoretical posture saw the nation as serving "the interests of the ruling elite, to support medieval expansion and to channel the energies of the working population, who might otherwise unite to overthrow the capitalist system that exploits them" (Holdsworth, 2010: 13). National symbols, as well as the cultural artefacts that directly or indirectly referred to them, became then propagandistic objects that –if let alone and without a critical approach– could prolong restricting ideologies, while at the same time excluding or minimizing minority forces; oppression and control, even in a contemporary context of universal human rights and cultural exchange, could be maintained in subtle yet powerful ways. Indirectly, as in Anderson's work, the necessity to address these inventions was recognised: not to destroy them, but to reinterpret them in more flexible ways, according to the interests and challenges of a determined society.

In their interest to explore the power of imagination and abstract invention, these theories went too far in the view of some critics in their rejection of an ethnic origin for individual nations: even

though it was now generally accepted that nationalism was not by all means an ancient discourse, according to a next generation of researchers it was indeed important to go beyond exclusive economic and political discourses and to consider local *ethnies* and their legacy of shared perspectives as an useful departing point for the creations of contemporary 'nations'. As British scholar Anthony D. Smith (1991: 39) developed in his 1991 text *National Identity*, "though most latter-day nations are, in fact, polyethnic, or rather most nation-states are polyethnic, many have been formed in the first place around a dominant *ethnie*, which annexed or attracted other *ethnies* or ethnic fragments into the state to which it gave a name and a cultural charter" – a view named as *ethno-symbolism*, where myths and symbols shared by a community –even if they do not possess a specific and verifiable historical origin– become the basis (and important part) of many contemporary nations. In addition to this, another important element of Smith's theories is his historical division between a Western "civic" and a non-Western "ethnic" notion of nation: the first one characterised by a "historic territory, legal-political community, legal-political equality of members, and common civic culture and ideology", and the second by "genealogy and presumed descent ties, popular mobilization, vernacular languages, customs and traditions" (Smith, 1991: 12). Even though the Western vs. non-Western division is not necessarily useful for the understanding of contemporary societies, mainly because it over-simplifies the multifaceted relations between different regions of the world⁷ and because it ignores the existence of these discourses in every country through –for example– liberal and conservative political parties, this contribution is valid in the way it recognises the endurance and strength of nationalistic discourses even in a context of global exchange: the power of a presumed ethnicity, even if it does not respond to a certifiable historical reality, cannot be completely minimised as some scholars like Anderson and Hobsbawm

⁷ If these theories were taken to the edge, they could even risk creating oppressive hierarchies where any country that claimed to represent the 'West' could claim a moral and intellectual superiority.

occasionally suggested. In exchange, Smith offered a general description of nation as “a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (Smith, 1991: 14) – a self-described provisional definition, that attempted to merge the more essentialist theories with modernist conceptions of the origins of nation. The ultimate desire was not to suggest that an *ethnie* had to dominate and impose their views over others in order to maintain the stability of a country; “a sense of solidarity of significant sectors of the population” around the notion of a common nation, with their values and duties, could be used as a unifying factor between different cultural perspectives (Smith, 1991: 21). An ethnic core, however, seemed to him a necessity to secure the creation of a strong and more unified national identity.

At this point, however, a question arises: in a contemporary context of exchange and cultural diversity, where countless voices coexist and try to be equally respected and recognised, is it still possible or even desirable to imagine that every citizen could share the same ‘myths’ and ‘historical memories’? In the UK, for example, it would be hard for Indian Britons to accept the most conservative notions about the value and legacy of the British Raj. Perhaps the best answer lies in an interpretation of nation, proposed by Homi K. Bhabha in –among other texts– *Nation and Narration*, where it is connected to “an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the ‘origins’ of nation as a sign of the ‘modernity’ of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality” (Bhabha, 1990: 1). This is once more related to Anderson’s and Hobsbawm’s approach, but it is particularly useful for the purposes of this work in the sense that it also considers how nations, since the moment of their creation and even more at a contemporary period of diverse globalised exchanges, are the result of constant processes of hybridisation, which reveal their protean nature and influence of both ‘local’ and ‘international’ forces. “The problem of

outside/inside”, commented Bhabha, “must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new ‘people’ in relation to the body politic, generating other sides of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation” (Bhabha, 1990: 4). In order to structure a new nation, the author seemed to suggest, it was not only necessary to consider the established forces already existing within a determinate social context, but also to recognise the importance and even positive influences of incoming ‘external’ forces, with their potentially creative and multivalent cultural perspectives. To achieve these mixing of cultural forces, Bhabha suggested “a turning of boundaries and limits into the *in-between* spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated” – that is, a transformation of the presumed rigid boundaries and discourses of more traditional forms of nation into a more flexible discourse where dialogue and communication create new social and national identities (Bhabha, 1990: 4). Despite their now accepted ultimately fictional quality, ethnic cores and common myths were not rejected or dismissed, but rather embraced and openly discussed; to create an equal society where its different members could coexist under its communal social umbrella, it was necessary to recognise and celebrate the individual values of each community and to establish meaningful dialogues where all could work together in a intermediate space of understanding for the creation new and ever-changing national identities. Within the context of the UK, as a nation with important challenges regarding cultural migration and potential polarization of its diverse cultural forces (that contemporary ‘Britishness’ whose re-signification will be discussed below), this approach is very useful to understand its current development and complexities and therefore will be the one used during the present thesis.

The notion of cultural belonging, after all, has always been within all the regions of the UK –as in many other ‘monolithic’ nations– deeply fluid and transformative. In 1701, Daniel Defoe had already mocked those who believed themselves ‘true’ nationals, saying that “A true-born Englishman’s a

Contradiction / In Speech an Irony, in Fact a Fiction” (Defoe, 2009): more than *one* identity, every British individual was –and still is– a mixture of discourses that complement and reinvigorate each other – a true Andersonian ‘imagined community’, never the result of unified impulses but of a rather messy and rich mixing of voices coming from different origins.⁸ The *Hallelujah Chorus* from the *Messiah*, for example, would not have become a patriotic symbol if it were not for the immigration of composer George Friedrich Handel: important ‘national’ emblems should not be flatly denied or stripped of all their importance, but consciously embraced in their varied origin and reintroduced in more flexible ways, recognising that rather than representing a “historical certainty and [a] settled nature” they are representations of the “obscure and ubiquitous form of living the *locality* of culture”, and are “more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications” than a traditional interpretation would make it believe (Bhabha, 1990: 291-292).

The understanding of national imaginaries in this thesis, therefore, will be connected not to a denial of their value –despite their abstract nature, their political and social influence as managerial units is still paramount. Instead, what will be highlighted is their ultimate (and necessary) *flexibility*, their protean qualities that taken together build an ever-changing, richer and more varied notion of ‘identity’: one where a previous incapacity (or disinterest) to allow a direct participation of the ‘subalterns’, described by Gayatri Spivak (1995: 28) as “the slippage from rendering visible the mechanism to rendering the individual, both avoiding ‘any kind of analysis of [the subject] whether psychological, psychoanalytical or linguistic’”, is not only addressed but also partly resolved by giving equal voice and influence to all members of society through political, economic or –as this thesis will show– cultural interventions. The notion of ‘Britishness’, which will recur many times in this and other chapters, shall be understood then not as an immovable monolith, or as a mere linguistic

⁸ As Anderson himself clarified, “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (2006: 6).

remnant of Empire, but reinterpreted as an 'in-between' space where many imagined, changing and valuable discourses –such as 'Englishness', 'Scottishness', 'Russianness', femininity, etc.– meet and overlap in a hybrid cultural exchange, blurring the lines between 'local' and 'international' forces and revaluating them in a context of globalisation and communication of different communities. A true coexistence, after all, cannot be accessed by merely “eradicating hostility or antagonism” (an action that could lead to totalitarian impositions) but by a critical openness that provides “spaces for debate, dissent and a coming together of multiple perspectives and modes of being and behaving” (Holdsworth, 2010: 71).

These spaces are particularly necessary in the UK, where diversity has continued to grow –and will continue to grow– despite immigration controls and political opposition; indeed, far from being untouched by foreign transformations, the former imperial centre has become “more thoroughly (and equitably) porous” and more appropriate for elaborate processes of hybrid intermingling (Winder, 2004: 13). It is therefore problematic to continue 'traditions' for the sake of being faithful to a pretended 'original' intention; in order to face more successfully future social challenges, and to ensure a proper discussion of new policies surrounding the growing cultural diversity of the country, Hobsbawm's assertion of the invention of traditions and the recognition that there is no 'purity' to return to must be remembered. Also, when approaching Bhabha's view of national hybrid identities, more specifically within the field of dramatic studies, it is necessary to use an essentially intercultural approach, as developed during the present thesis. Through this perspective, a more all-encompassing view of the varied views of nationhood will be allowed, considering 'old', 'new', 'national' and 'foreign' values and the sometimes unequal power relationships between them; also, from a philosophical perspective, the borders between the 'I' and the 'other' will be muddled, recognising with Emmanuel Levinas (1979: 52) that “to approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, (...) to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I”. In other words,

in order to preserve a divisive and monolithic discourse the following chapters will recognise the necessity of dialogue to build a sense of identity, and the value of gendered, regional and ethnic discourses to build an overlapping and fluid notion of nation. Finally, from an artistic perspective, this view will also permit the understanding of different stylistic trends, allowing a deeper discernment of the politics of globalisation and –at a time when many societies are still trapped in hostile confrontations– the creation of cultural bridges thorough processes of assimilation, rewriting and reinterpretation of aesthetic discourses.

Before continuing, though, it is necessary to explore the origin and critical significations of the word interculturalism, especially when considering the diversity of characterisations that it has received since its first theoretical development in 1959. This will be the main focus of the following section, bearing in mind that in it both the sociological and dramatic-performative connotations of the term will be considered: two understandings developed in parallel through different fields that, however, did not reach the same degree of public and social recognition at the same time.

3. Literature review (II): sociological and dramatic notions of interculturalism

In 1959, in the book *The Silent Language* by anthropologist Edward T. Hall, the term interculturalism was coined for the first time. It was the result of a long series of “conceptualizations at the Foreign Service Institute [of the United States [US] Department of State] in the early 1950s” (Hart et al., 2002: 5): there, influenced by his upbringing “in the culturally diverse state of New Mexico”, his commandment of “an African American regiment in World War II”, his “work with the Hopi and Navajo” tribes in the US, and his reading of cultural anthropologists, linguists, ethnology and Freudian psychoanalytic works, Hall built a new theory which tried to explore the complex processes of communication between cultures (Hart et al., 2002: 5). The main core of the book rested in the

“illumination of previously hidden dimensions of human communication, particularly proxemics (how space affects communication) and chronemics (how time affects communication)” – a view that tried to reveal the limitations of human languages, while at the same time expressing the underlying existence of common non-verbal communicative elements between members of different cultures (Hart et al., 2002: 12). On a more general level, in its acceptance of cultural differences, non-judgmental nature and cultural relativism (the belief “that a particular cultural element should only be judged in light of its context” [Hart et al., 2002: 11]), Hall’s work proposed some important theoretical bases for a more balanced understanding of cultures and the challenges of their mutual processes of exchange and communication, especially at a time when colonialism was crumbling and Western developed societies were starting to face the complexities of global immigration.

Hall, however, “made no attempt to create a new academic field with a novel research tradition” (Leeds-Hurwitz, quoted by Hart et al., 2002: 13); it was up to other figures to develop his intercultural discoveries, and to explore the possibilities of the term in many different fields of knowledge. One of these was American theorist and artist Richard Schechner, who after exploring Hall’s work, and based on the practical works of some creators who had developed ‘intercultural’ projects before the term had been coined⁹, introduced interculturalism during the 1970s as one of the foundational stones of ‘performance studies’, a multidisciplinary field that explored “any action that is framed, presented, highlighted or displayed” within a social context as a carrier of multiple meanings, revealing how its creation and interpretation reflects “social practices or advocacies”, that is, particular political, ethical or cultural idiosyncrasies (Schechner, 2002: 2). This naturally led

⁹ In her historical exploration of the inspirations of the term, Erika Fischer-Lichte traced certain elements of it (if not its ultimate theoretical definition) to the critical writings of Artaud, Brecht and –going even further back in time– Goethe. For more information, refer to ‘Interculturalism in contemporary theatre’, in *The Intercultural Performance Reader* (1996), edited by Patrice Pavis, pp. 27-41.

to an interest to compare different political, religious or social ideologies present around the world, and to investigate more closely the “exchange among cultures, something which could be done by individuals or by non-official groupings, [that] does not obey national boundaries” (Schechner, 1996: 42).¹⁰ It was an idealistic view that saw these connections as a result of globalisation, a first step into a hypothetical “culture of choice”, where an individual would be able “to celebrate his own cultural specificity” according to rational decisions “rather than something into which you are simply born automatically” (Schechner, 1996: 49).

The scholarly recognition and influence of Schechner’s arguments contributed to the understanding of the growing processes of globalisation and more specifically of artistic combination, and led during the late 1980s to the appearance of a more nuanced conception of the term among US and European academics in theatre and performance studies, focusing on the processes of cultural reinterpretation. French author Patrice Pavis, for example, was one of the most important representatives of this generation, proposing in his *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* the “hourglass of intercultural exchange”, an eleven-step classification of the processes required to successfully “adapt” a specific creation from a “source” to a “target culture”, understood to be those audiences (mainly Western) interested in the discovery of other cultural values but presented through familiar aesthetical frameworks (Pavis, 1992: 4). The notion of the *intercultural* was then for him a one-way direction process, where a creator or artist had the right to ‘appropriate’ a cultural artefact from a different society and to adapt it in such a way that it could be understood by ‘local’ audiences; this procedure, at least hypothetically, could be replicated and applied by any community around the world, therefore allowing a fluid communication of ideas while at the same time permitting meaningful adaptations and re-interpretations. In due course, the theory

¹⁰ In the specific realm of drama, as it will be developed with more detail below, this led to the mixture of different dramatic codes into one –and not necessarily unified– artistic product.

continued, once the method reached a globalised and widespread recognition, there would be a general rejection of “any centralised and committed reading”, undoing “discursive hierarchies” (Pavis 1992, 14): a central argumentation that Pavis himself developed even further in other works, such as the 1996 compilation *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, where in the introduction he advanced a more precise definition of intercultural theatre as the creation of “hybrid forms drawing upon a more or less conscious and voluntary mixing of performance traditions traceable to distinct cultural areas” (Pavis, 1996: 8) – that is, processes that according to this somewhat limited view resulted merely from the intentions of specific artists, and that by themselves implied an equal possibility of cultural groups all over the world to develop similar attempts at cultural appropriation and reinterpretation.

Despite their theoretical richness and classificatory complexity, however, these perspectives failed to address –at least at this early stage of development– the political forces and economic agendas that affect potential attempts of cultural connectivity and exchange: as part of a US-European discourse, they did not fully consider the challenges faced by cultural discourses coming from peripheral or previously excluded societies. Postcolonial authors who emerged in the aftermath of Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) objected to the presupposed balance between cultural forces, pointing out (in what was effectively called an ‘intercultural war’) social inequalities and emphasising the reductive value of a view where exchange was seen only as a non-political semiotic process. Gautam Dasgupta (1991: 80) argued, through representative examples such as the *Mahabharata* adaptation directed by Peter Brook (1985), that many well-regarded stagings of “Oriental” traditions or texts were no more than “an illustration of the West misreading the literature of the East”, where valuable cultural material –connected to political and historical elements– was turned into colourful productions that only satisfied the ‘exotic’ thirst of many Western audiences. Rather than true encounters, where both sides could learn from each other, these productions were –to the eyes of

these critics— expressions of imperialism, “a cannibalisation of forms without respect for the [original] cultures” that minimised past political oppressions while selfishly reinvigorating the aesthetics of an exclusive target group (Knowles, 2010: 12). Like Brecht’s interest in Chinese theatre and Artaud’s attraction to Balinese rituals, the results could be useful for the ‘civilized’ societies where the plays were performed to economic success; but they would never benefit or increase the intellectual heritage of the underdeveloped areas used as sources of inspiration and then discarded without any regards for the “ethics of representation” (Bharucha, 1993: 2). A new, more balanced communication was suggested: one where a constant two-way dialogue could be implemented, forcing artists to recognise the political implications of their experimentations, and their responsibility as potential unconscious preservers of dominating discourses with their legacies of control and monolithic simplification.¹¹

At this point, and in parallel to this academic and artistic discussion, a more political and practical view of the term as a potential generator of policies started to emerge. With the surge in the late 1980s and early 1990s of neo-liberalism, immigration and multinational economic exchange, the field acquired more relevance from a socio-political perspective; theories coming from the field of social studies started to be used by different governments to deal with the increasing levels of cultural variety within the communities under their control. Interculturalism did not have at first a privileged position, being neglected in favour of or subordinated to *multiculturalism*, which

¹¹ Partly as an answer to these criticisms and partly as an attempt to renovate the discussion on the field, in 2010 Pavis published the article *Intercultural Theatre Today*. On it, he argued about “the complete mutation of interculturalism” due to the progressive yet inexorable weakening of the nation-states, the increasing global forces of communication, and the growing commoditisation of society (Pavis, 2010: 6-13). Uncontrollable cultural forces, mixing with each other in an astonishing amount of variations, created a world where “the intercultural becomes the general rule, it is no longer controllable or manageable by nation-states and by intellectuals who claim (in vain) to represent them” (Pavis, 2010: 6); atomised “multi-ethnic and multiple identities are no longer based on fixed identities, on defined belongings, but on clusters, on regroupings of practices” (Pavis, 2010: 14). The proposal certainly aimed for a more comprehensive view of the unending complexities of cultural exchange; but once more it failed to provide a view of the socio-political agendas and relationships of power at play in these encounters.

described “the fact of pluralism or diversity in any given society, *and* a moral stance that cultural diversity is a desirable feature of a given society” (Meer & Modood, 2011: 5). In practical terms, multiculturalism was applied to two scenarios: first, to vindicate “discrete groups with territorial claims, such as the Native Peoples and the Québécois” in North America, giving them a degree of self-government although without necessarily recognising them as “‘nations’ within a multinational state”, as some aspired to (Meer & Modood, 2011: 5); and second, and more importantly for the purposes of this work, to accept and reinforce “the post-immigration urban *mélange* and the politics it gives rise to” within a mono-national state in Europe (Meer & Modood, 2011: 5). Although this recognised the importance of social variety within the same cultural space, and in many ways protected views that had been previously oppressed and silenced by majority discourses, it also generated in the eyes of some critics ‘walls’ between communities; for example, former BBC Governor Ranjit Sondhi—an immigrant himself, born and raised in India—commented that “gradually the right to be equal was overshadowed by the right to be different (...), [resulting] in the tendency at the neighbourhood level to live in entirely separate ethnic worlds, a kind of self-imposed apartheid, a cocooned existence in which whole generations could exist without ever having to get engaged in wider social issues” (quoted by ICoCo, 2012: 15). Although it was not necessarily the intention, multiculturalism preserved then some of the divisions and prejudices among communities and races that existed before its original implementation, preventing the expansion of more hybrid spaces of communication and sometimes maintaining cultural hierarchies that kept in place limited views of national identity.

Parallel to this, right-wing politicians all over Europe showed at the end of the first decade of the 21st century an increasing disdain towards what they considered as the limitations of multiculturalism: French ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy criticised it in January 2011 when declaring that “we have been too concerned about the identity of the person who was arriving and not

enough about the identity of the country that was receiving him” (Daily Telegraph, 2011). Also, the former British Prime Minister David Cameron, based on what he identified as “the British experience” but aiming to express “general lessons for us all” (implying the entire European community), attacked in the 2011 Munich Security Conference “the weakening of our collective identity” due to the encouragement of “different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream” (Cameron, 2011). These two declarations no doubt revealed the agendas of these Conservative governments, for whom the threat against their defended ideas of national identity (a more limited and controlled vision) was unacceptable; the word ‘multiculturalism’ had become, for them, increasingly connected to tense and menacing coexistences. But going beyond this, and considering also the criticisms that were being directed to the term by other organisations with different political backgrounds, it could be argued that by being connected to a narrow (and, as it has previously been pointed out, historically dubious) concept of rigid *permanence* of ‘traditions’ on both sides and a politically correct ‘respect’ for external sensibilities, multiculturalism partly helped to perpetuate an agenda that denied spaces for agreement and reinforced the creation of “tokenistic and pseudo-communitarian strategies” (Bharucha, 1993: 11).¹²

In this context, interculturalism rose inside the sociological field as a renovating perspective. Based on the abovementioned works by Schechner, Pavis and Bharucha, a more nuanced view of the term appeared, now connected with the construction of stronger social policies; going beyond the realm of artistic productions into wider political scenarios, recognising socio-economic barriers and confronting them dialogically, and through the appreciation of multiple traditions, it weakened the

¹² A noticeable –and polemical– example is the French law that banned the use of burqas with the argument of a long-established anti-clericalism: despite valid arguments about the improvement of women’s rights, behind this decision lies an ideological imposition, a gesture of historical ‘superiority’ that attempts to solve complex social tensions –causes of the 2005 riots, among other events– with a patina of social equality.

opposition between 'me' and 'the other' (or 'the others'), following Spivak's proposal (2012: 66) to confront antagonisms "between secular and nonsecular, national and subaltern, national and international, cultural and socio/political by teasing out their complicity" in the creation and preservation of repressive political discourses.¹³ Instead, this reading attempted to transform interculturalism into a source of knowledge and horizontal exchange: as Ric Knowles developed in his book *Theatre and Interculturalism*, the term was understood "as *processes*, circulations of energy, in which previously marginalised cultures are seen to work *together* rather than *against*, constructing genuine, rhizomatic, and multiple interculturalities that respect difference while building solidarities" (Knowles, 2009: 61). In other words, interculturalism was reconsidered as an active force that allows processes of hybridisation and redefinition of national identities, as well as a humanistic approach where "openness, dialogue and interaction between cultures [led] to long term change" (ICoCo, 2012: 61).

Of course, just as it happened to multiculturalism, interculturalism was also criticised. Some researchers considered it too similar to multiculturalism, due to their common emphasis in "ethno-cultural diversity, accommodation of culture and rejection of assimilationism" (Tremblay, 2010: 56-7), or implied that it was flawed because "all forms of prescribed unity, including civic unity, usually retain a majoritarian bias that places the burden of adaptation upon the minority" (Meer & Modood, 2011: 14). However, it must be pointed out that both criticisms were raised about Quebec's 'interculturalist' project, created in opposition to a Canadian 'multiculturalism' that "was seen as the vision imposed on French speaking Canadians by English speaking Canadians" (ICoCo, 2012: 60): a specific model built on "the 'fundamental values' of Quebec society which were presented as gender equality, secularism, and the French language" (ICoCo, 2012: 60). As it can be seen, this was

¹³ A more in-depth theoretical exploration of the possibilities behind the 'other' will be done in the third chapter of this work, where it will be a platform to launch the analysis of feminist and regionalist discourses.

not an intercultural scheme but rather an assimilationist one that defended local values from what was perceived as a dominant and even threatening external discourse; the development of new identities out of communicative processes was ruled out in favour of a defence of ‘traditions’, which in the best case scenario could only lead to an uneasy multicultural coexistence. ‘Real’ interculturalism, instead, aimed to build spaces for meaningful dialogue and social restructuring: this is the more nuanced understanding that, despite its undeniable political and cultural challenges, will be used throughout this thesis to comprehend this term, applied not to communities separated by vast geographical spaces, but to the smaller realm of the national construct known now as the UK, filled with gendered, ethnic and regional perspectives.¹⁴ Theatre and, more specifically, Chekhovian performances presented inside the country will be used as case-studies and frameworks to grasp these complex issues within a more contained and theatrical perspective.

The fact that this work will attempt an *intercultural reading*, though, should not be understood as a desire to merely explore openly intercultural shows (where, for example, actors from different cultures bring their different techniques and merge them in a mutually respectful process), or as a desire to attack those productions that do not fit the abovementioned parameters. As Pavis commented in 2010, “the denomination ‘intercultural theatre’ is falling out of use” (Pavis, 2010: 7), at least in the limited understanding developed during the ‘intercultural wars’ of the late 1980s and early 1990s; in its place, in a context where globalisation and mass immigration have caused a reconsideration of previously established cultural parameters, the intercultural field has acquired a wider and more direct political flavour, connected to contemporary discussions about cultural

¹⁴ Rustom Bharucha, in the 1990s, had already proposed the seemingly more precise term *intraculturalism* to encompass these internal complexities, describing it as the “interaction (...) of regional and local cultures within the larger framework of the nation-state” (Bharucha, 1993: 9); however, in a globalised age, and more specifically in the context of the highly developed UK, where the Internet allows a more fluid contact between individuals and immigration waves have created a variety of social forces, it appears as a limited concept that can easily be embraced –although not forgotten– by the wider realm of the intercultural exchange.

communication and identity. From a dramatic perspective, it implies a conscious decision to explore with equal respect and analytic interest the different registers of the British theatrical world, from the most traditional productions to those that attempt a more experimental edge, without forgetting creations that express contemporary urban and regional transformations or explore local connections with international discourses. The intercultural approach will be used then as a critical framework to explore the relationships between these forces, and the way in which they reflect the polyvalent angles of the country's ever-changing *national identity*: a notion that, as defined in the previous section of this chapter, is ultimately hybrid due to the constant influence of different cultural forces and their 'invented' qualities, and that in order to be grasped within a manageable space will be framed here through a series of Chekhovian productions presented between 2009 and 2011 –a historically important time frame that reflected many important issues (regional independentist projects, gender politics and cultures, nationalist vs. internationalist ideologies, etc.) that still considerably affect the contemporary understanding of the country.

The reasons to choose Chekhov were already suggested: his position as both an assimilated author, almost a 'national' icon and symbol of many 'traditions' of the country¹⁵, and as a 'foreign' creator whose texts are constantly re-translated and re-interpreted by both local companies and international groups presenting their work in the UK. In other words, he possesses an 'intercultural' quality, a multifaceted public persona and literary wealth that recurred through and was used by different aesthetic and cultural perspectives: the 'foreignness' of his plays allowed from the

¹⁵ This assimilation can be seen, for example, in the way *The Daily Telegraph's* theatre critic Charles Spencer analysed Galina Volchek's production of *The Cherry Orchard*: "in comparison with top-grade British productions of [Chekhov's] plays, Galina Volchek's staging seems hit and miss, sometimes perverse, and at times downright vulgar" (Spencer, 2011). Without sharing or attacking Spencer's views, what is revealing here is the way how at this point, supported by more than a century of British productions and interpretations, it was already possible to compare a Chekhovian Russian show to a very local –and, in this case, superior– way to 'do' and 'understand' the Russian author. The answer to the question of how such a 'way' could be defined, though, will be left for the different chapters of this work to develop it.

beginning a less reverent attitude, a transformation not only of the staging but also of the texts themselves (despite the eventual development of specific traditions).¹⁶ So although he never visited the country, Chekhov is relevant because of the way in which his works captured the imagination of so many important creators born, raised or working inside the UK: as presented later on in the historical contextualisation of this work, he has been repeatedly explored and reconstructed by many directors, reaching the point of becoming “almost as much part of the British theatre's repertoire as Shakespeare” (Rebellato, 2010b). The reasons for this are connected to two factors: first, the inherent aesthetic qualities of his works, not only linked to their origin in a 19th century Russia in the middle of a transitional historical period, but also useful to illuminate other transformative periods during the UK's 20th century history; second, the dramas' intricate processes of reception, assimilation and re-interpretation, which evolved from an initial reticence after their first staging in the UK in 1909 to a first acceptance at the late 1920s, and later on to a period of plural revalorisation after the early 1960s. It was a process that exemplifies both the stages of adaptation of a ‘foreign’ dramatic discourse (whose particularities will be considered in the conclusion of this work), and the historical transformations of the UK during the abovementioned time frames, which –as this thesis will prove– confirms the value of socio-cultural exchanges for a healthy reinforcing and redefinition of the nation.

To contextualise how these ideas will be scrutinized throughout this text, the following section will outline a general methodological presentation, an overview of all the chapters and a summary of the main problematics and socio-cultural issues that will be considered in each one of them.

¹⁶ Once more it must be noted that this is by no means exclusive to Chekhov: the strong and constantly rekindled connection between British creators and the Russian author's plays, however, is a very fertile soil that allows a more comprehensive exploration of all the theatrical styles coexisting in the country, as well as of the different notions of national identity that cohabit within it.

4. Chekhov today: an overview of the present work

As presented at the beginning of this introduction, this thesis is a socio-political study focused on the evolving processes of *intercultural* connectivity and their relations with the ever-changing British national identity, expressed through a case-based analysis of eight Chekhovian stagings premiered between 2009 and 2011. The dates were chosen for two main reasons: first, to create a timeframe where the selected amount of shows could really serve to represent the diversity of approaches to Chekhovian staging around the country at a specific historical point, rather than a series of scattered productions that responded to different historical backgrounds; second, and more importantly, because of the chronological relevance of this era, a moment of socio-political uncertainties and transformations that mixed –at least inside the UK– the remnants of a global financial crisis, the growing questions about the meaning of and the participation in the European Union project versus the increased power of nationalisms and regionalisms, the relevance of immigration and globalisation as publicly contested issues, and a political change that saw the Labour Party replaced in office after 13 years of power by a coalition led by the Conservatives. As the conclusion of this work will indicate, the exploration of specific shows will allow a more comprehensive understanding of each one of these historical issues and their relation with processes of cultural reception and reinterpretation; also, taking into consideration the decisive influence of these topics in the development of the country during the next five years, they will be highly useful to discuss the contemporary evolution of British national identity.

The thesis starts then with a contextualisation of a selection of Chekhovian stagings premiered in the UK since the beginning of the twentieth century, allowing a further understanding of the different styles and traditions that the considered contemporary shows were inspired by or reacted to. From there, the work will proceed to analyse the eight selected shows in four main chapters

(with two shows per section), considering first those that –according to the reading proposed here– maintain traditional discourses, and progressively moving towards those that used more experimental styles: positioning them in their geographical and historical contexts, all these sections will explore the contemporary relevance of Chekhovian theatre, more specifically in its connection to the changing concept of British national identity at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. In order to further understand the socio-aesthetical implications of the chosen productions, each one of them will begin with a specific theoretical contextualisation, further illuminating the voices, discourses and modes suggested in the shows and allowing a more in-depth analysis of their position in relation to other productions.

To better consider the dialogue between the original Chekhovian plays and the contemporary creator or creators that re-signified them for British audiences (whether they were directors, writers or playwrights), all the productions analysed here will be considered as part of an *intertheatrical* tradition, “so-called by an analogy to the intertextual, in which no writing or reading is isolated from the other writing and reading within its culture. (...) It seeks to articulate the mesh of connections between all kinds of theatre texts”, and considers that all dramas “performed within a single theatrical tradition are more or less interdependent” (Bratton, 2003: 37-38). This means that, added to the socio-political elements they received and echoed, the connection of the stagings with previous or contemporary shows will also be considered; as it will be seen in the following chapters, in their use of the Russian writer and in their position as part of a long string of Chekhovian theatrical presentations within the UK, all of them established aesthetic connections with specific and historically traceable discourses, sometimes openly using them as the base of their own re-interpretations while in other occasions only referring them indirectly.¹⁷ Altogether, this will

¹⁷ Out of the productions analysed here, an example of the first case would be dreamthinkspeak’s *Before I Sleep*; of the second, Sovremennik Theatre’s *The Cherry Orchard*.

recognise what *The Haunted Stage* described as “the sense of coming back in the theatre”, where every performance “is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the processes of recycling and recollection”, ultimately turning theatre into “the repository of cultural memory” (Carlson, 2001: 2). In the specific case of Chekhovian dramaturgy, this will allow a deeper understanding of the pervasive influence of the author’s dramas within the country, the position of the author as an ‘assimilated’ foreigner, and the variety of interpretative possibilities offered by the texts, allowing fluid readings of British national identity and intercultural communication.

The interest of the present work, at first, was more focused in textual elements like the specificity of certain translations, but eventually (due to the potential of analysing connections between specific productions and their social context) it opened up to an analysis of the entire theatrical endeavour, understanding with Thomas Postlewait (2004: 47) that “the event occurred both on and off stage, and those various off-stage attributes, in all of their complexity and contradictions, contribute to the possible construction and the possible meanings of the event”. Ultimately, as said above, the present work is socio-political at its core, and the selected dramatic stagings were chosen because of the way their aesthetic variety allow a controlled yet rich understanding of the historical and political perspectives that are part of the national cultures and exchanges. Due to their original places of presentation (in London as well as in regional theatres), to the fact that it was not possible to attend all of them, and that each one requires a different interpretative approximation, all the analyses use different sources, selected to strengthen the explored socio-political arguments.¹⁸ In every case, however, critical reviews, published in newspapers, magazines or Internet blogs, are

¹⁸ Out of the eight productions analysed in the present work, three of them were not seen by this writer: Sam Mendes’ *Cherry Orchard*, Peter Hall’s *Swansong* and Gate Theatre’s *Vanya*. They were selected, however, for their representative quality and the way they added to the development of the arguments exposed here; in order to obtain the most accurate picture possible of the shows, rehearsal photos, descriptive articles and interviews with members of the cast were used.

used as an interpretative base, reconstructing with them the complexities of the reception of the shows and the intrinsically subjective agendas of the reviewers that reveal the cultural and political complexity of the country. At the end, this analysis aims to explore the transformations endured by the UK at a pivotal part of its history, when remaining elements of the colonial past –the enduring fights with Argentina for the Falkland Islands, for example– mixed with an internal political transformation, a growing presence of separatist movements in Scotland and the question of the international approach to the building and understanding of the ‘nation’ –as expressed in the struggle between different parties on the subject of the participation in the European Union project. As it will be seen, all these elements are important subjects in the chosen productions, proving once more the importance of theatre as a public arena useful to discuss social issues, and more importantly the relevance of Chekhov as a means to illuminate and reveal these perspectives.

The first chapter will demonstrate a subtle continuation of traditional views of national identity, through the analysis of two double-bill or dual performances, contrasting or at least connecting one piece by the Russian author to the work of a ‘national’ author (symbol of cherished concepts like patriotic integrity and aesthetic empowerment). Based on the theoretical understanding of the transformative (and interpretative) power of a specific staging over the text of a well-known play, and the relevance of translations as creators of particular socio-political readings, the text will explore both productions while focusing (although not exclusively) on the conservative approach that their famous and respected directors used on the final result. First, Peter Hall’s version of Terence Rattigan’s *The Browning Version* (2009), with its melancholy portrayal of an English teacher, will be linked to his own production of Chekhov’s early dramatic creation *Swansong*, also a one-act piece reflective of the loneliness of the main character –an old actor and prompter locked inside a theatre. Added to the stylistic preferences with which they were staged, this comparison will permit an interpretation of the traditional visions of Chekhovian dramaturgy in the country, as seen

through the eyes of one of his most representative creators. From there, The Bridge Project's 2009 productions of *The Cherry Orchard* and Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* –directed by Sam Mendes with a cast of US and English actors– will be considered, revealing the theatrical dialogue of the UK with its former colony, the difficult post-imperial relationships between two established heritages, the evolution of the 'special relationship' at the start of the Obama administration and its changing usefulness for Britain, and the contradictory critical interpretations of varied urban centres.

The second chapter will discuss international discourses and their influence in the creation of local imaginaries, through two foreign productions presented on the British stage, using theories on processes of reception, models on importation and the economic and social power of sponsors and festivals (those in charge to bring the productions to the country): in this way, both shows will not be treated as merely exotic elements completely alienated from their environment, but as constitutive parts of the theatrical fabric of the country that respond to specific agendas of both independent producers and established local cultural organisations. Beginning with the Sovremennik Theatre version of *The Cherry Orchard*, brought to London by Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich, and continuing with the Periférico de Objetos rewriting of *Uncle Vanya*, directed by the Argentinean *auteur* Daniel Veronese and presented as part of the Brighton Festival, various elements will be considered: the presence of international directors in the context of British-Chekhovian drama circa 2010 (surrounded by the social situation that led to the triumph of the Conservatives), the communicative differences due to the use of different languages, and the political and social symbologies that lie beneath directorial preferences such as use of the space and the degrees of physicality of the presented creations. The Sovremennik production will be used as a platform to analyse the cultural influence of Russian émigrés, mixing the aesthetic and political heritage of the Motherland and the capitalist discourses characteristic of contemporary British society. Meanwhile, Veronese's performance will contextualise theatre festivals and their social

penetration, as well as issues such as the reinterpretation of Russia's dramatic heritage in a Latin-American country deeply marked by a difficult historical context of dictatorship and democracy, its reinterpretation by a company influenced by the work of Antonin Artaud and Jean Genet, and its ultimate presentation in a British society that still remembered the 1982 Falklands War. Through all this, the post-colonial attitudes of the UK, and their complex existence in a context of multi-ethnic traditions, will be captured.

The third chapter will approach discourses by minorities previously minimised in the universe of British national identity, through rewritings of the Russian author by playwrights born and raised within the UK. Departing from a historical exploration of the notion of the 'other' and its understanding from Hegel to Levinas and Said, and later on tackling womanhood's evolution and its contribution to culture from the times of Mary Wollstonecraft to those of Judith Butler, the presence of gendered and ethnic discourses will be underlined, using two productions that respected Chekhov's plots, dramatic developments and characters while reshaping their original stylistic preferences. In order to analyse in more depth their complexities, and how radically they rewrote pre-established notions of citizenship and nationhood, the focus of the analysis will (not exclusively) lie then in the texts themselves, unpublished but obtained thanks to the collaboration of the writers' literary agents. Also, because of the importance to go beyond the trends of bigger and commercial companies in order to understand less publicized views of local identity, non-West End and regional theatres will be considered. London Gate Theatre's *Vanya* (2009), a feminist recreation of the original piece written by Sam Wolcroft with a claustrophobic simplification of the story into four main characters, will show the conflicted but engrossing attitudes of multi-ethnic citizens of contemporary London within the metaphorical framework of twisted, gendered psychological battles. Meanwhile, going further into the examination of regional divergences within the UK, the scrutiny of Edinburgh's Lyceum Theatre production of *The Cherry Orchard* (2010) –freely 'translated'

by the Scottish playwright John Byrne— will explore the possibilities offered by Chekhovian dramaturgy to build a defence of different cultures, and its power as a multi-layered expression of independentist, foundational projects.

The fourth and final chapter will consider politically progressive understandings of national identity, through British experimental performances that go beyond ‘naturalistic’ theatre or conventional written dialogue, creating entirely new works inspired by Chekhov’s iconographies and symbolisms; due to their highly allusive nature and ambivalent relationship with the original dramas, the visual staging, the connection between aesthetics and socio-political reflections and the significations of the effects produced by the creators will be considered. Dan Rebellato’s *Chekhov in Hell* (2010-2011), a surreal, satiric exploration of the contemporary situation of the UK through the positioning of Chekhov himself as the main character, will present the contradictions offered by a urban, culturally mixed world, and the challenges faced by artists at a time of politically correct postures and a Babelian explosion of cultural identities; by using the beliefs and ideals personified by the protagonist, and criticizing an occasional incapability to establish links to other societies, the breakdown will illustrate the necessity for a more all-embracing art where interculturalism takes centre stage and produces syncretic, collaborative aesthetics. Meanwhile, dreamthinkspeak’s promenade performance inspired by *The Cherry Orchard*, entitled *Before I Sleep* (2010), will be explored —as it was suggested at the beginning of this introduction— as an expression of such a cultural interaction: enthusiastically received by Brighton’s community, this show will conclude the chapter with what in the opinion of this writer is a more progressive view of aesthetic perspectives and social interactions, highlighting for the last time the relevance of the Russian author as a catalyst for an art capable of building bridges over a historical past and a present of ever-changing social contrasts.

To close the thesis, the conclusion will bring together the main ideas discussed throughout the thesis, focusing in a re-examination of the theoretical terms presented in this introduction. First, after a reconsideration of the Chekhovian productions previously presented and/or analysed, an abstract outline to understand processes of cultural reception and reinterpretation of dramatic discourses in 'foreign' geographical constructs¹⁹ will be proposed, hopefully useful not only for the UK's dramaturgy but also for other authors and social contexts; to support this point, the outline will be then applied to analyse Shakespeare's reception process in Japan.²⁰ After this, through a defence of interculturalism as an establisher of cultural bridges and a potential builder of more harmonic societies, the text will highlight its intimate connection to a plural, hybrid and changing notion of national *identities*; it will be a protean reading useful to justify how open and constant exchanges –with the notions of 'nation' constantly renegotiated in a perpetual process of superimposing liminalities– are central to build a functional and fair post-Brexit British society.

¹⁹ The expression 'geographical construct' will be used in the conclusion over other terms such as 'nation', 'region' or 'city', used throughout other chapters of the thesis, to emphasise the abstract nature of the outline and the way it can be applied to different geographical divisions.

²⁰ The presence of these abstractions at the conclusion will also serve to give this thesis a value beyond its 'built-in obsolescence' created by its limitation of analysing productions that quickly become historical after being superseded by new performative examples.

Assimilation, Empire and revolt: a brief history of British Chekhovian productions

In order to understand the evolution of Chekhov's reading within the UK, as well as his historical importance in the understanding of the evolution of British national identity, it is important to consider first some structural and formal elements of his dramas, by positioning them as aesthetic responses to important historical events. More than an attempt to do a detailed recount of the first Russian productions, then, some representative elements of his dramas will be presented throughout these pages, with the intention of showing how he was understood by his Russian contemporaries, how these interpretative trends influenced the perception of his works, and how the aesthetic choices present in the plays partly explain their later distribution and recognition in many other regions of the world. After this, a more in-depth analysis of the British history of Chekhovian productions will follow, showing how a myriad of 'British' interpretations of the author have developed since the beginning of the twentieth century, departing from the original 'Russian' view, reflecting the social transformations of the UK and indicating the appropriation and re-interpretation of the Russian writer within this new geographical context, whether to reflect traditional views of national identity or to offer more progressive readings of its meaning. Ultimately, this will serve as a platform for the following chapters, revealing many of the intertheatrical connections that the more contemporary productions established with classic British Chekhovian stagings, and indicating why Chekhov is so relevant in the context of varied and intercultural national identities.

Born in 1860, Anton Chekhov was only a year old when the Tsar Alexander II, re-establishing "a policy of westernization [started by] his ancestor Peter the Great" (Marks, 2008), signed and

released the Emancipation Act, where the serfs were emancipated from their landlords and given some rights. This reform, of course, was far from being perfect: the now free peasants “were still tied to the village commune, which enforced the old patriarchal order, deprived of the right to own the land individually, and remained legally inferior to the nobles and other states” (Figs, 1996: 39). But the seed had been planted for a possible future where Russia, led by a generation of enlightened bureaucrats, might possibly become a modern, industrialized and even democratic country along Western lines. Chekhov himself was the result of these expectations, an example of the possibility of a new, stronger middle class: of relatively humble origins, son of a shopkeeper and “removed from the forced servitude of serfdom by a grandfather who bought his own freedom” (Marks, 2008), he managed to finish school and attended medical school at Moscow University between 1879 and 1884. Adding to this his eventual popularity and recognition as a writer, he very much personified the hopes of those reforming years, becoming almost a bridge between different social classes and perhaps even deeply embracing a more comprehensive notion of ‘Russianness’ which compounded both the more cosmopolitan environments of the main cities and the deep poverty and underdevelopment of the vast rural areas of the country. Perhaps also his profession as a doctor helped him to see the world in a more detached and analytical way, without the passionate excesses of other writers and intellectuals of his age: as he said to G. I. Rossolimo in an 1899 letter, “I have no doubt that the study of medicine has had an important influence on my literary work; it has considerably enlarged the sphere of my observation, has enriched me with knowledge the true value of which for me as a writer can only be understood by one who is himself a doctor. It has also had a guiding influence, and it is probably due to my close association with medicine that I have succeeded in avoiding many mistakes” (Chekhov, 1920). Also, this career probably influenced his aesthetic preferences: one where, at least at first, an analytic and less romanticised desire to express “life as it really is” (Chekhov, 1920) was mixed with a humorous and sarcastic vein.

Indeed, at the beginning of his twenty-five years long writing career, Chekhov became recognised as a satiric writer of short stories and dramatic sketches published and presented in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. It is worth noticing how this start was, yet again, connected by chance to another important historical event in the history of Russia: “in 1881, a hand-made grenade fashioned by a terrorist group ended the reign of Tsar Emperor Alexander II, sweeping into power his conservative traditionalist son, Alexander III” (Marks, 2008). This was particularly tragic due to the fact that Alexander II was about to sign “a limited constitution which would [have given] invited figures from the public an advisory role in legislation” (Figes, 1996: 40-41): though this perhaps would not have been enough to counter-act the massive social inequalities that were already crumbling the social structures of the country, it might have been a positive first step towards a wider social understanding. Politics, instead, took a deeply conservative and reactionary turn, where any possible opposition to the tsarist politics was effectively banned and oppressed; in this context, any overt political criticism would have been madness, and in order to pass the very strict censorship it was necessary to avoid these matters or at least treat them in a light and seemingly inoffensive fashion. Chekhov’s writing at this time responded to these requirements; having started publishing out of a mixture of economic and aesthetic reasons²¹, his work aimed for a witty attack on traditions and social customs. His dramatic works at the time indicate this: described by Vera Gottlieb as “farce-vaudevilles” (1982: 21), some of them are *The Bear* (a 1888 comic attack on the ludicrousness of pretentiousness and lack of self-knowledge) and *The Proposal* (a 1889 satire on courtship and the requirements of marriage). Their ironic tone and highly theatrical style were easily accepted among

²¹ An anecdote described by Chekhov in a 1888 letter is very revealing: “I begin a story on September 10th with the thought that I must finish it by October 5th at the latest; if I do not I shall fail the editor and be left without money. I let myself go at the beginning and write with an easy mind; but by the time I get to the middle I begin to grow timid and to fear that my story will be too long: (...) this is why the beginning of my stories is always very promising and looks as though I were starting on a novel, the middle is huddled and timid, and the end is, as in a short sketch, like fireworks” (Chekhov, 1920).

audiences used to melodramas and short comic sketches; the author himself mentioned in 1887 how “it is much better to write small things than big ones: they are unpretentious and successful” (Chekhov, 1920). This ‘first Chekhov’, in fact, became almost immediately recognised all over the country, and in many ways created an understanding of his works that would last for many years, even after his death; Meyerhold’s experimentations in the 1920s, which included an adaptation of *The Bear*, *The Proposal* and *The Jubilee* under the title *33 Swoons*, were inspired by this phase of irreverence, burlesque and humour, in turn deeply influenced by the Russian satiric tradition represented for example in the writings of Gogol. Even the late masterpieces, as time went by, came to be seen in this way: versions like the 2010 *Uncle Vanya* by the Muscovite Vakhtangov Theatre, presented in 2013 in London, prove that this perspective is still fresh and relevant, offering a view that contradicts notions of the author as solely a psychological author full of melancholic subtleties, as he has been often understood within the UK. This does not mean though that this carnivalesque view was never attempted within Britain; in fact, it was one of the very first readings to reach its shores. But, due to historical circumstances explained below, it never reached the degree of complexity that it had –and continues to have– in Russia.

Instead, the British interpretation of the author (similar in that extent to what happened in other countries such as France) has been focused in the staging and reinterpretation of his later full-length dramatic works, written between 1895 and 1904: *The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1899), *Three Sisters* (1901) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). To understand why they were so important, and why their aesthetics became so relevant later on, it is necessary to point out three important events in Chekhov’s life that decisively influenced his writing: first, his friendship with the publisher and journalist Aleksey Suvorin (1835 – 1912), who encouraged him to develop his skills and leave behind the writing of comic short stories and sketches; second, his 1890 trip to Sakhalin Island, after which he wrote “a book upon our penal colony and prisons there” (Chekhov, 1920) which pointed out the

brutality and despair of the people living under extreme conditions; and third, his humanitarian contribution during the 1891-92 famine, caused by “an unfortunate summer followed by a hard autumn and winter”, where he “organized a scheme for buying up the horses and feeding them till the spring at the expense of a relief fund, and then, as soon as field labour was possible, distributing them among the peasants who were without horses” (Garnett, 1920). All these elements, when considered together, point out to the increased understanding that Chekhov had of the social problems of his country; as an author limited by the government’s censorship, yet still fascinated by the social diversity of Russia, he progressively created a richer and subtler writing style. Inspired by Suvorin’s and other friends’ criticisms, he attacked his earlier creations as “frivolous, heedless, casual” and commented that he used to write his stories “as reporters write their notes about fires, mechanically, half-unconsciously, taking no thought of the reader or myself” (Chekhov, 1920). The result of his conscious attempts at becoming a ‘real writer’ led to a refinement of his ironic and humoristic touch, an almost impressionistic psychological profiling of the characters, and ultimately a desire to explore the complexities of Russian national identity at the turn of the 19th century through his short stories and plays.

Drama, in fact, became from this point onwards one of the central elements of his work. After the failure of his first full-length drama *Ivanov*, premiered in 1887 to a disastrous public and critical reception, Chekhov had left aside theatrical writing for the more lucrative environment of literary fiction; when he came back to the stage, he had managed to evolve into a different type of writer. “It is the business of the judge to put the right questions, but the answers must be given by the jury according to their own lights” (Chekhov, 1920), was a notion he had exposed to Suvorin in a letter dated in 1888, indicating the necessity on the part of the writer to avoid easy morals and to let readers or spectators decide by themselves; his convictions had led him to an aesthetic posture (which is at the core of Chekhovian drama), focused in the equal understanding and respect for all

the characters on the stage, no matter the extension of their parts, collaborating in the development of the plot and helping in the comprehension of different layers of Russian society. The ultimate goal of the artist, as he himself had said to M.D. Kiselyov, was “to be absolutely true and honest (...); a man bound, under contract, by his sense of duty and his conscience” to express complexities of reality (Chekhov, 1920) – a perspective that turned his works not only into tapestries where many social classes dialogued, but also into dramatic spaces where (in more contemporary interpretations) intercultural processes could be expressed with more balance.²² In 1895, when he started to write *The Seagull*, he followed his own advice, focusing in “a great deal of conversation, little action, tons of love” and “swearing fearfully the conventions of the stage” (Chekhov, 1920). The work, in fact, attempted to avoid many of the clichés of the melodrama of the time; as the author described it, “I began it *forte* and ended it *pianissimo*—contrary to all the rules of dramatic art” (Chekhov, 1920), the implication being that the work was trying to focus on more subtle emotional shades rather than the conventional dramatic excesses on the melodramatic stage. However, and perhaps expectedly due to the acting trends of the country, the original 1896 premiere ended up in disaster, with the author writing to his brother Mikhail that “the play has fallen flat, and come down with a crash. There was an oppressive strained feeling of disgrace and bewilderment in the theatre. The actors played abominably stupidly. The moral of it is, one ought not to write plays” (Chekhov, 1920). It seemed to be the end of an experiment, and from then on the writer promised to never create anything else for the stage; only the intervention, two years later, of Konstantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko took him out of his theatrical apathy and convinced him to allow the re-staging of *The Seagull* by the then recently founded

²² Even though the term had not been coined during Chekhov’s lifetime, and considering that he said that the “English could have nothing in common with the life of his characters” (France, 2001: 598), it is noticeable how the intertextuality of his works created points of contact that were later on useful for intercultural readings within the UK. A clear example is *The Seagull*, whose characters Treplev and Arkadina are connected to Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Gertrude through their actions, relationships and dialogues.

Moscow Art Theatre (MAT). What followed is one of the most famous –and influential– collaborations in the history of theatre.

The importance of the MAT is even greater when taking into consideration one of the themes of the present work, that is, the influence of the Russian author on British territories. Indeed, without the theatrical developments that Stanislavski instigated during those first years of his theatrical career, the way Chekhov would have been understood abroad would have been different. Not that these methods were necessarily always in tune with the approaches originally imagined by the writer; until his death from tuberculosis in 1904, in fact, there were many arguments between him and the young director regarding the comic or tragic qualities of the aforementioned dramas, and Stanislavski's tendencies to sentimentally prefer some characters over others. A glaring example was *The Cherry Orchard*: described by Chekhov as “not a drama, but a comedy, in parts a farce”, he tried to convince the director to play the character Lopakhin, “a very decent person in every sense (...) [who] would come out brilliantly in your hands” (Chekhov, 1920); to this, Stanislavski protested in a letter that “it's not a comedy, nor a farce, as you wrote –it's a tragedy, whatever outlet into a better life you revealed in the last act”, and eventually chose the character of Gayev, overdoing the aristocratic element and “making him more sensitive, less resilient than the script warranted”, therefore unbalancing the “the delicate equipoise of the comedy” (Senelick, 1997: 67).

Despite Chekhov's best efforts, then, it was Stanislavski's view that was eventually adopted by the troupe: it was this more melancholy approach the one that received a huge degree of recognition during the original premiere in January 1904, and that acquired an international prestige due to the growing popularity of the MAT, “which was at its best in these years and rapidly becoming world-famous – primarily as the theatre of Chekhov” (Bartoshevich, 1993: 21). Ultimately, this had a lasting influence that affected not only the understanding of this specific work but of all the Chekhovian

canon; the view of the Russian creator as a satiric humourist was transformed, especially in the minds of international audiences and creators who experienced him for the first time through the MAT productions, into one of an incurable nostalgic who was mourning the passage of time and the collapse of an aristocratic class.²³ Stanislavski's interpretation had thus a wider impact than the unfiltered notions of the author himself: and with some further distortions, created by time, personal inclinations and diverse geographical locations, it was his more conservative view the one that eventually would influence the Chekhovian interpretations that the "post-war [British] intelligentsia of the lost generation" would look for after the end of World War I (Bartoshevich, 1993: 26).

On 2 November 1909, in a theatre located in Sauchiehall Street –one of the most populated areas of Glasgow– the Royalty Theatre, part of "a complex of offices, shops and a hall, designed by the architect James Thomson" (Jones, 2010), presented *The Seagull*, the first English language production of a Chekhov play. It was not a heavily publicized or particularly remarkable occasion for that industrialized society: Chekhov –or Tchekhof, as his first translator would call him– had died only five years earlier in Badenweiler (Germany), and his dramas were less known by audiences and literary circles than his narrative fiction.²⁴ However, the majority of the audience of that historical

²³ Although the MAT did not visit the UK until the 1950s, the influence of the company was undeniable in the British Isles even before World War I. In January 1914 H.G. Wells went to Moscow to see a performance of *The Cherry Orchard* and met Stanislavsky during an interval, encouraging him "to come to London, if possible with plays by Chekhov" (Bartoshevich, 1993: 20); Gordon Craig presented his celebrated *Hamlet* in Moscow in 1912; and "Michael Lykiardopoulos, secretary to the directors of MKhT and interpreter to Craig whilst he was at MKhT, travelled to London to conduct talks with (...) [theatrical impresario] Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree" (Bartoshevich, 1993: 22). Added to the influence of pretended apprentices of Stanislavsky (like Theodor Komisarjevsky, whose case will be analysed below), the early notions of the MAT about Chekhov deeply, if indirectly, influenced the British understanding of the author.

²⁴ The very first translation of Chekhov in Britain was printed in 1903, "only a year before the author's death: 'Cherny monakh' (1894, The Black Monk) was the title story of R.C.E. Long's anthology" (France, 2001: 598).

evening knew that they were witnessing something ‘modern’ and ‘different’: the Repertory Theatre²⁵, producer of the show, aimed “to attract an ‘intelligent’ but mainstream audience to support penetrating drama in a big theatre” (Iles, n.d.). This was a significant challenge, considering the “middling but profitable” touring companies that with their light entertainments were the main source of revenue for “Howard and Wyndham Limited, the long-term owners” that were lending their stage (Iles, n.d.): perhaps because of this, and helping those who were not aware of the existence of the Russian author or his particular style, the show was preceded by a lecture from George Calderon, its translator and director. “A play by Tchekhof is a reverie, not a concatenation of events”, he commented (Calderon, 1912: 28). This eased the work of the critics who were exposed to such an unknown creator, and partly explained the insightful reception –which would be relatively uncommon in the next 20 years– that the play received. A journalist from the *Glasgow Herald* recognised the mixture of “pure realism” and “elusive symbolism”, the “futility of life (...) illuminated by comedy”, and “the humanity of the play (...), so warm and appealing that it somehow touches and interests” (*Glasgow Herald*, 1909: 9): an analysis attuned to the subtle tonal shadings of the piece, that even Konstantin Stanislavski in his 1904 original Russian production had struggled to capture.

This acceptance is perhaps less surprising when considering the historical situation of the Scottish city at the time: turned by an accelerated process of industrialisation into “the second city of the empire” (Fraser, 1996: 2), with a general economic liberalism that exalted free trade, Glaswegians were exposed to many foreign discourses. Massive waves of Irish citizens had arrived in the city after 1851, comprising 6.73% of the population by 1911; “Ukrainians, Lithuanians or Poles” were among the 1.74% of foreign-born immigrants that were settling down on its productive River Clyde

²⁵ Also known as the Scottish Repertory Theatre.

banks (Withers, 1996: 150). Russian colonies –a mixture of entrepreneurs and political refugees– were also present: in 1892, the “Glasgow Council organized meetings (...) to protest against persecution of the Jews in Russia”, supporting a population that lived mainly in the rough, industrialized area of The Gorbals (Mitchell, 2005).²⁶ Even though it is unlikely that any of them could have gone to the Chekhov presentation, due to the fact that the aforementioned area was “Dickensian in its poverty and squalor (...), a place of grime and poverty” (JSpace, 2013), it is tempting to think that their existence might have influenced Calderon in his desire to choose this work; added to the Scottish born and bred citizens whose own position in the context of the political map of the country was uneasy at best, the presence of Russian immigrants must have been the ideal complement for a local and national identity inquiry that would have made Chekhovian ambiguities and lack of overt answers very appealing and more easily comprehensible.²⁷

One fact is certain, though: for the promoters of this particular *soirée*, this was not merely an impassioned attempt to present an exotic and foreign work, but also a conscious effort to build a sense of community and nationality inside the city. The organising company presented itself as “a Citizens’ Theatre in the fullest sense of the term, established to “make Glasgow independent of London for its Dramatic Supplies” (Scottish Repertory Theatre, 1911: 1): at a time when Scotland was trying to reinforce its national pride, facing what then seemed to be complete control by the English government, the presence of this ambiguous Russian play was an act of refreshing rupture,

²⁶ “By 1901 the Russian (overwhelmingly Jewish) population was 6102, or 24.7% of the total foreign population [in Scotland]. In Glasgow, the rise was even more dramatic. The number of Russian Jews relative to other foreigners increased to 45.9% from 19.1% in 1881” (Education Scotland, n.d.).

²⁷ Jewish theatre companies, in fact, had a great impact in the later development of Glasgow’s dramatic history: in 1936 Avrom Grrembaum founded *The Glasgow Jewish Institute Players*, which eventually would be the base for the creation in 1941 of the *Glasgow Unity Group*, a leftist organisation that aimed to both highlight the needs of the working classes of the city and to give them accessible and good theatrical performances. Their most successful production, revealingly, was *The Gorbals Story* (1946). More information can be found in Maloney, P. (2011) *Twentieth-Century Popular Theatre*. In: Brown, I. (ed.) *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Pp. 60 – 72.

giving to local audiences a different taste to the imported theatrical troupes coming from London. The socio-cultural discussions of the work must have reverberated with the *intelligentsia* of “business persons, journalists and academics” that comprised the board of the company and whose main interest was “to be a national theatre (...) [and] establish a ‘school’ of playwrights” (Iles, n.d.), reinforcing in the process a growing sense of Scottish self-definition and territorial belonging that would be expressed four years later in the 1913 presentation to the Parliament of the Scottish Home Rule bill.

Parallel to this, the importance of the creator and translator of the piece must be considered, in the sense that the staging was for him the realisation of a long wished desire, a remembrance of wonderful times spent in the vast Slavic territories. Indeed, from 1895 to 1897 Calderon lived in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, learning the language and “supporting himself by writing articles and giving lessons in English”: what started as a desire of “gaining a useful kind of special knowledge, not from any predilection for the country”, soon became a source of fascination that would remain alive for the rest of his short and wandering life (Lubbock, 1921: 39-40). For he was –as his friend Percy Lubbock would recall years later– an “unhampered pilgrim”: son of a Spanish Catholic priest turned Lutheran and a devoted English mother, his personality was characterised by a constant desire for travelling “with nothing to encumber him but his staff and his scrip” (Lubbock, 1921: 16). His cultural knowledge was considerable, on account of his Oxford education and innate interest in religions and cultural folklore; his death mysterious, disappearing in the middle of the Gallipoli Campaign. But among all this, there was always a passion for drama and theatre: an experienced playwright, he came to appreciate the work of Chekhov through the help of figures like Vsevolod Meyerhold, first actor in Konstanin Stanislavski’s MAT troupe and later director of many innovative

theatrical companies.²⁸ The 1909 show and lecture, then, were the result of a decade-long project that would have never borne fruit in more traditional theatrical spaces, and that could only have been accomplished in a society that fitted his progressive aesthetic preferences: a fact confirmed by both the muted critical reception of his 1912 translations of *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard* and a London production based on the former on the same year, which was “met with a singular lack of enthusiasm” (Senelick, 1997: 134).

These seemingly ‘minor’ facts –the presence of a wanderer who embodied intercultural communication and exchange, and a society eager to explore the meanings and contradictions of its own identity– would become recurrent and influential factors in the productions *and* the different degrees of critical acceptance of the Russian author’s dramas. London’s illustration is again representative, more specifically in the case of two different yet equally revealing British premieres presented a year before the aforementioned *Seagull*, in May 1911. The first, a semi-professional performance of *The Bear*, took place in the Kingsway Theatre of Holborn, and was produced and supervised by “princess Bariatinska, alias Lidiya Yavorskaya, who had settled in England in 1909”, as part of a week’s triple bill (Senelick, 1997: 132). The second, which took place only a couple of weeks later, was the much bigger presentation of *The Cherry Orchard*, and consequently it received a more comprehensive –although not necessarily positive– critical coverage. The promoter of such an occasion was the Stage Society, a group that continued the ‘avant-garde’ British dramatic tradition so “closely linked to a political or social reform movement” (McDonald, 1993: 30), and was

²⁸ An article on the then current situation of the Russian theatre, ‘The Russian Stage: a sketch of recent Russian Drama’, was published by Calderon on *The Quarterly Review* in June 1912. It was based on the essay-letter *Russian Dramatists* sent to him by Meyerhold a year before: to read it, please refer to *Meyerhold: Écrits sur le théâtre* (2001), volume 1, Lausanne: L’âge d’Homme, pp. 150-158; or to *Russian dramatic theory from Pushkin to the Symbolists: an anthology* (1981), Texas: Texas University Press, pp. 200-209.

supported by illustrious figures including George Bernard Shaw.²⁹ Compared to the questionable acting values of the Princess's show, the cast of this stage performance included young talents like Mary Jerrold (Varya), Harcourt Williams (Trofimov) and Nigel Playfair (Pishchik).

Despite these economic differences, the two shows are important for their political and socio-historical implications. Twenty two years before, on 7 June 1889, when the venue that premiered *The Bear* was still known as the Novelty Theatre, the London premiere of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* took place there (Lloyd, 2008): a pivotal event that, in part because of a "grand publicity campaign successfully engineered" by Ibsen's translator and campaigner William Archer, and in part because of the support by feminists like actress Elizabeth Robbins, became "a key historical event" that helped in the development of 'the woman question' inside the stage and the growing liberalization of women's rights within Victorian society (Postlewait, 2004: 46-47). Now, in the second decade of the twentieth century, Bariatinska's staging was a symbol of the advances reached after a little more than two decades: as a foreigner and financially independent actress, she had the freedom to showcase her talents in what was then an obscure work inside the UK, the selection of which probably responded to the aforementioned success and popular appeal of the satires within Russia. This fascination, however, as it will be demonstrated, was not immediately shared in the capital of the then biggest Empire of the world.

Regarding the case of the Stage Society, it is striking to find the presence of yet another foreigner as the initiator of the project: Shaw himself. Indeed, previous to this staging the Irish author had shown some curiosity in Chekhov's dramatic pieces: in a letter sent to the playwright and novelist Laurence Irving in October 1905, he alluded to the "several dramas extant by Whatshisname

²⁹ Shaw himself was heavily favoured: the company's first production had been *You can never tell* (1899). Many artists of the Edwardian era, like Harvey Granville Baker and St. John Hankin, supported each other and presented shows with the group.

(Tchekoff, or something like that)” and asked if he had “any of them translated for the Stage Society” (Shaw, 1972: 569). Besides their aesthetic values, Shaw’s attraction to the dramas could be related to his personal interest in Russia: a country in the middle of an ultimately failed revolutionary revolt, which inevitably attracted his attention as a long-time supporter of the economic improvement of the neediest social classes. Also, as an immigrant who had found a rich cultural environment in London and actively participated in its social debates, without stopping being conscious of the historical disdain that Englishmen had always shown for his compatriots, the plight of the oppressed probably echoed personal experiences: because despite being a man with an “uncomfortable, classic love-hate relationship” towards his country that “vacillated at any given time between disenchanted exasperation and obdurate promotion”, Shaw nevertheless considered himself an Irishman and underlined his national identity as a useful weapon to “take an objective view of England, which no Englishman can” (O’Flaherty, 2004: 122-123). His occasional “disillusionment with Ireland” and view of Dublin as a “city of derision and invincible ignorance” that paralyzed and repressed their citizens (quoted by O’Flaherty, 2004: 123) might have also enhanced his understanding of Chekhovian characters, trapped in a series of anachronistic social rules and faced with the arrival of new forces that promised (or threatened) the imposition of an entire new social system. ‘Russia’ and ‘Ireland’ (or, to be more precise, the mixture of abstract nationalistic constructs described as such by their respective *intelligentsias*) both aimed for a new order, where the needs of the poorest would finally be satisfied; on a darker note, they were also connected by their seemingly desperate immobility. Futility was a common feeling; a general lack of development

asphyxiated many idealistic endeavours; and unexpected bursts of joy coexisted with an underlying, unrelenting sadness.³⁰

It cannot be assumed here, though, that either Shaw or Bariatinska aimed for a presumed respect or understanding of Chekhov's 'original' intentions. In fact, it should be said that the two productions connected to them³¹ offered very specific and idiosyncratic readings of Chekhov's dramaturgy. Bariatinska's focused on the exaggerations and grotesque excesses of the author's early style: perhaps, had it opened to more enthusiastic reviews, this would have turned Chekhov – at least in the eyes of British critics – into a contemporary equivalent to Gogol, leading eventually to a reinterpretation through the prism of the British satiric tradition of Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift and Laurence Sterne (the last two being, revealingly, Irish). However, due to the melodramatic tendencies of the main actress and promoter (which also were present in the already mentioned 1912 version of *The Seagull*, in which she starred [Miles & Young, 1993: 238])³², and because of the wider recognition of the Shaw-sponsored and supported troupe, the critics were more exposed to a 'realist' interpretation of the drama, deeply grounded in specific social issues; a staging influenced by the pre-existing knowledge of the MAT productions, and by Shaw's vision of the author as a harsh, even pessimistic social critic. "He had no faith in these charming people extricating

³⁰ The relationship between Chekhov and Ireland has always been a very fruitful one: "the first production [of one of his plays] was in 1915", and since then comparisons have "often been made between the social stagnation of [his] characters and those of James Joyce *Dubliners*", as well as his "formal influence on Frank O'Connor" (Meaney et al., 2013: 205). Also, as Robert Tracy (quoted by Meaney et al., 2013: 206) develops, in the 1920s and 1930s a string of "Chekhov plays done with admirable lightness of touch" served to underline the "historical paralysis, the frustration of sexual desire and personal ambition and the futility of relations between men and women" of those citizens living in Dublin.

³¹ Bariatinska produced and played a role in her version of *The Bear*; Shaw sponsored and participated in the staging of *The Cherry Orchard*.

³² Despite having a brief love affair with Chekhov, and offering her drawing-room for the first reading of the play back in 1895, Bariatinska had been dismissed by the Russian author due to her "showy melodramatic style", which he considered "ill-suited to his plays" (McDonald, 1993: 35, 36). This tendency was also captured by the English critics, who commented on her consistent over-acting (see McDonald, 1993: 36): this no doubt hindered a deeper understanding of the play at this early stage of its critical reception.

themselves (...); therefore, he had no scruple in exploiting and even flattering their charm”, he wrote (Shaw, 2011); a view that was perhaps closer to his own political and aesthetic sensibilities than to those presented in the original creations.

This disconnection, added to “an under-rehearsed cast (...) and Kenelm Foss’s sluggish direction” (Senelick, 1997: 132-133), no doubt influenced the generally puzzled reaction by the critics: A.B. Walker from *The Times* considered it an alien creation, that “can’t but strike an English audience as something queer, outlandish, even silly”; meanwhile, *The Daily Telegraph* indicated that “an atmosphere, a social life, a set of characters, so different from those which we habitually meet, was, and must be, a shock to a well-regulated and conventional English mind” (quoted by Senelick, 1997: 133). But there is something else in these comments; a certain condescending tone, unable or uninterested to understand a dramatic society of uncertainties, so different from the stable pre-World War I England with the security of its ‘democratic’ developments and at the summit of its presumed majestic political power; the idea of a cultural exchange, an intercultural understanding through the local staging of a foreign play, seemed to these reviewers implicitly absurd in a space that carried with pride the success of well over a century of expansionist processes. Shaw’s interpretation, no matter how different and ‘distorted’ it might have been from the original, proved to be for critics as inappropriate as Bariatinska’s satiric approximation: it was historically unacceptable in a universe of post-Edwardian prosperity, full of rotund imperial certainties, where the notion of national identity seemed more precise, more connected to that mythical and unifying notion of the *Volk* proposed by Herder, than ever.³³ As it will be seen, it was going to be necessary for a global conflict and the arrival of yet another foreigner to finally transmute Chekhov into an established member of the British theatrical canon.

³³ Glasgow’s original 1909 production, due to its insularity from the cultural circles of London, did not influence significantly the early development of English Chekhovian productions.

The name of this man –another Russian émigré– was Fedor Komissarzhevsky, better known in George V’s kingdom as Theodor Komisarjevsky. The timing of his arrival, in the early 1920s, is revealing in the sense that the island had been then radically transformed by historical developments: the world of 1912, with all its certainties, was shaken by the arrival in 1914 of a Great War, “the plagues of which Egypt never dreamed” (Shaw, 2011), that affected some balances in Europe and introduced a subtext of cynicism and insecurity in part of the British population. There were also important migration movements: among other members of the Empire, “1.4 million [Indian] men” arrived in Europe to battle for the Allies, discovering a myriad of contradictory societies that faced them with their own oppressed cultural identities (Winder, 2004: 275). The 1917 October Revolution, for example, led to the displacement of thousands of Russian citizens, alienated from their natal country due to political or economic causes: a matter of life and death for those who belonged to the fallen tsarist empire, an opportunity to find fortune for other less wealthy individuals. As Robert Winder (2004: 278) argued, this historic period triggered the intercultural, globalised exchange process that –after a period of imperialistic expansions– melted some of the cultural barriers of Western European countries, exposing to many ‘peripheral’ foreigners the “grandeur and power (...), the miseries and inequalities” of their civilisations, and the xenophobic undertones of their colonialist projects.

It is in this context of increased communication that Komisarjevsky arrived in London in 1922. Half-brother of Vera Komissarzhevskaya, a famous actress who had played the role of Nina in the original production of *The Seagull* in 1896, his theatrical career never seemed to point towards Chekhovian dramaturgy: possessor of a fierce independence that twice thwarted his aspiration to join the MAT, Komis –as he was known to friends and colleagues– dedicated his first professional years directing for “Nezlobin, a rival entrepreneur, in Moscow and at his sister’s theatre in Petersburg” (Senelick, 1997: 156), winning fame as an eclectic director whose preferences were more inclined towards a

modernist trend, aiming to establish a Wagnerian “universal model of theatre with drama”, where “the expressiveness of a multi-coloured canvas, of graceful gestures” could be presented simultaneously to “psychologically motivated enunciation and pauses” (Borovsky, 2001: 250). He was also a sharp and controversial theatre theorist: in a copy of his *The Actor’s Creative Work and Stanislavski’s Theory*, published in 1916, Stanislavski “dotted [its pages] with questions and exclamation marks and (...) heavily underlined” some words, enraged by the interpretations of his younger colleague (Borovsky, 2001: 269). For those who knew the theatrical circles of Russia, then, an idea of generational succession between these directors was highly unlikely: a fact conveniently forgotten a decade later, when Komis embraced the British critical perception of complete obedience to the Stanislavskian credo. It was a chimera that he was pleased to maintain: it gave him not only an aura of respectability within the dramatic community, where the MAT’s recognition had steadily grown since pre-war (failed) attempts at bringing it to London in 1908 and 1911 and after their 1912 production of *Hamlet* designed by Gordon Craig (Bartoshevich, 1993: 21), but also a perceived aesthetic ‘authority’ to introduce Chekhov’s dramas just as they had been conceived by the master Stanislavsky, with all of their imagined contrasts and exotic flair.

The reality was instead more fascinating: as the result of a clever understanding of the commercial preferences of local audiences, Komis created a new interpretation connected to the nostalgic preservation of imperial values, which would become the most common approach among British directors during the next fifty years. The process started as a mere opportunistic decision: in early 1925, “a youthful company from the Oxford Playhouse” staged in London an amateur production of *The Cherry Orchard* which infuriated one of “one of the last surviving masters of Victorian playwriting, Henry Arthur James”, who dismissed it as “the impression of someone who had visited a lunatic asylum and taken down everything the inmates said” (Senelick, 1997: 141-142). His opinions got into the press and generated a small controversy that ironically upped the interest for the Russian

writer's plays; producer Philip Ridgeway, recognising the potential of this situation, decided in December 1925 to stage the complete full-length works of Chekhov in the small, peripheral Barnes Theatre. It was undeniably a risky proposition: despite the moderate success of the aforementioned Oxford Playhouse's production, which was transferred after a month from its original location at the Lyric Hammersmith "to the Royalty Theatre at the West End" (Senelick, 1997: 142), Chekhov still remained an uncertain economic commodity. Undeterred, Ridgeway produced the first show of the new season, a *Seagull* directed by A. E. Filmer that counted with the support and acting of the star-to-be John Gielgud: the result, however, seemingly confirmed the general lack of interest for Chekhovian dramaturgy, becoming only moderately successful and continuing the critical tendency that considered the plays as foreign, obscure creations. Thinking perhaps of the necessity of adding a touch of colourfulness to the proceedings, and unaware of Komis's creative past, Ridgeway asked the Russian director to be in charge of *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*. Of the three, undoubtedly the second was the most important: premiered on the 16th of February 1926, and running twice every day for the next eight weeks, its immediate critical and commercial success took everyone by surprise, unexpectedly becoming a landmark in the history of British drama and influencing the acceptance of Chekhov as a representative figure of the nation's dramatic canon.³⁴

To understand why, it must be considered first the reflections of the director himself, who put his success down to "the fact that I evolved the way to convey Chekhov's inner meaning and make the rhythm of the 'music' of the play blend with the rhythm of the actors, giving the necessary accents with the lighting and the various other 'effects'" (Komisarjevsky, 1929: 172). His staging aimed for aesthetic pleasure and sensorial delight; a romantic approach where individual psychological profiles were subordinated to the symphonic 'whole' of voices, colours and costumes, and every

³⁴ In 1924, the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR was founded in London; as an émigré who did not feel close to the Bolsheviks, though, Komis did not ask for the help of this organisation for the production.

line treated as a poetic catalyst for a dreamy, other-worldly atmosphere of impressionistic evocations. Far from the exploited creatures of Shaw or the satiric characters of princess Bariatinska, Chekhov's *dramatis personae* were treated as parts of a pastoral, elegiac landscape.

The decision to convert Chekhov's play into an explosion of sentiments, however, still carried with it important political undertones: it was a rewriting (as seen below) that capitalised on the needs of a society that –due to important political and social transformations– was quickly losing its connection to an Imperial definition of its national identity, but that at the same time longed for more 'engrossing' and elegant past eras –even if this meant, as Ernest Renan had suggested 40 years earlier, a communal oblivion of some of the most unsavoury episodes of those times. In 1926, the UK was an interwar society; one which wanted to forget the struggles of the previous decade, colouring "the mood of disillusionment and dejection" with an unlikely nostalgia for the more prosperous years of the Victorian regime (Gottlieb, 1993: 151). At the same time, new generations pointed their eyes towards a better, sometimes naively idealistic future: young British men and women organized for the first time "as a political and cultural phenomenon", displacing the "despair" with "a vague belief in internationalism, an equally vague repudiation of war" and sometimes even a "mystical worship of nature" (Marwick, 1970: 37, 42).³⁵ From both points of view, Komis's interpretation was timely: it captured a romantic sense of the past while offering a relatively non-judgemental approach to the characters, in an elaborate mixture that affected many elements of the production. The selection of Constance Garnett's translation, originally published with the other full-length plays by Chatto and Windus in 1923, was significant, due to its "literary gentility which turned [Chekhov's] characters into proper Edwardians" (Senelick, 1997: 140), and which

³⁵ At the same time, the Flapper lifestyle developed, radically transforming the social position of women and giving them a stronger awareness of their sexuality, personal independence, political relevance and artistic relevance. For more information, please refer to Chapter 3 of David Fowler's *Youth Culture in Modern Britain, c.1920–c.1970: From Ivory Tower to Global Movement – a New History* (Palgrave Macmillan. London: 2007).

added a degree of linguistic academicism less present in the more colloquial original; also, the text was heavily cut by Komisarjevsky, especially in its last act, “in an effort to speed the action and avoid any sense of a dying fall” (Tracy, 1993: 70). Other ‘repairs’ included the elimination of patronymics, changes of names (Protopopov being re-baptized as Petrov), the erasure of geographical and social references, and –most significantly– the reinterpretation and rewriting of some individuals: Tusenbach, for example, was transformed “from an earnest, drab young officer” to a youthful and melancholic figure, “removing or altering references to him as ugly or plain” and underlining a more conventional romantic pathos in his conversations with Irina (Tracy, 1993: 65). This might have responded to audiences’ expectations or, at least, to the directors’ interpretation of the public: as Komis reflected years later, “to suit the public’s taste, life on the English stage has to be presented through a mist of loveliness” (Komisarjevsky, 1929: 67). But beyond this there was a deeper social commentary: by moving back the play’s time from 1901 to 1871, while compressing the actions from nearly three years to little more than one, Chekhov’s impressionistic style, focused on the power of the passage of time and the suffocating sense of stillness and dissatisfaction, was displaced. Instead, a leaner, more conventionally dramatic progression appeared, where the political concerns of the play were buried under the patina of a dreamy evocation of transitory doubts and climactic certainties. Not surprisingly, Chebutkhin’s musings at the end of the piece were trimmed, eliminating the ironic undertone of the sisters’ valedictory monologues: an ambiguous exaltation of the future was turned into an optimistic reaffirmation of ideals.

Truthfully, these factors did not imply a complete assimilation of the play to a British staging style: if that had been the case, perhaps, the production wouldn’t have received the same level of critical attention. Komisarjevsky also applied techniques learnt during his directorial period in Russia (most relevantly his work with his half-sister, an actress whose style was deeply imbued in the excessive

and self-celebratory traditions of melodrama so detested by Chekhov³⁶), which were at odds with the traditions of local theatre and added a sense of novelty to the proceedings. Performances were invigorated with the help of a stronger verbal musicality and attention to physical movements, “to make the characters appear energetic, even sprightly” (Tracy, 1993: 72); the sumptuous lighting, structured around patterns of colours, aimed to produce precise emotional responses and establish a growing, seductive enchantment.³⁷ Just as the already mentioned Gordon Craig’s 1912 production of *Hamlet* had used “light and scenery (...) to create symbolic worlds in which the play was enacted” (Schoch, 2002: 72), Komis proposed an unique and otherworldly universe filled with suggestion and sadness.

All these elements, however, were at the end subordinated to the desire to please local audiences: backed with a touch of exotic Orientalism to capture their imaginations, and 16 years after the first staging of the author in the country, the director actually “simplified, romanticised, sentimentalized and *anglicized*” the play (Tracy, 1993: 70), reinforcing existing national discourses and obliquely responding to the identity issues of a community which was disillusioned, ready to be enraptured and filled with doubts about the future. The staging thus not only tried “to adapt a work to the taste of a specific public by removing anything too out of keeping with current dramatic norms” (Senelick, 1997: 159), but it also recognised the uncertainties of a transitional historical period and offered an answer in the shape of a revalidation of more ‘glorious’ and traditional times. After all, although he claimed to profess “neither the Bolshevik, Fascist, Nazi or any other political faith”, in his 1935 book

³⁶ Komisarjevsky, for example, directed Vera in Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* during the 1908-1909 season – a frustrating experience, due to the lack of interest of her older relative, that nevertheless showed him the importance of “the art of the actor”, “the importance of working in consultation with the stage designer”, and perhaps more importantly, “the binding, unifying force of the director, the true head of the production” (Borovsky, 2001: 236).

³⁷ A good example came at the end of the third act, when two of the sisters were positioned behind screens and lit with “the glow of the burning town”: this created “hugely projecting embracing shadows” that, added to their poetic ruminations about life, suggested “a striking visual correlative for the closeness of their relationship, and for the real shadows that are about to engulf them” (Tracy, 1993: 74).

Theatre in a Changing Civilisation Komis nevertheless preferred more conservative (and even authoritarian) forces that would “help to open up the road towards a new life of cultured, disciplined individuals, united in corporations under the leadership of enlightened men for social, scientific, and artistic work” (Komisarjevsky, 1935: ix): in other words, he defended a more hierarchised social structure, which –within the British context– could be connected with the Imperial nostalgia and romantic longing for a past that, after a brutal war, seemed not only jolly but also a Hobsbawmian set of invented ‘traditions’ that was worth fighting for and returning to.

The production, economically successful and symbolically powerful, explored then the moods and swings of British national identity: one that “prepared [Chekhovian dramaturgy] for [its] admission into the theatrical canon” of the UK (Tracy, 1993: 76), while at the same time enriching it with the creativity of specific ‘foreign’ aesthetics. Such was the allure of its peculiar interpretation, however, that its influence was ultimately limiting: years after the original freshness of Komis’s interpretations had stalled successive generations of directors and actors still studied his productions and imitated him, copying and teaching to younger audiences the stylistic choices of the Russian director and preserving a discourse that carried within a defence of imperial and traditional discourses. Progressively, Chekhovian dramas stopped being considered representatives of a ‘Russian’ sensibility; magnifying their contention, the tragedy of the characters’ emotions, they were turned into British expressions of an aristocratic reminiscence that can be interpreted as a soothing consolation to the ongoing colonial collapse. Among the many examples of creators who preserved these notions, two famous productions of *Uncle Vanya* are representative due to their critical recognition: 1945’s New Theatre version directed by John Burnell, with Laurence Olivier playing Astrov and Ralph Richardson as Voinitsky, which was presented as World War II was coming to a close; and the Chichester Festival 1962 performance, directed by Olivier with a cast that included Michael Redgrave, Max Adrian and Sybil Thorndike, which was significantly successful in a year when

the UK saw three of its former colonies (Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Uganda) gain independence.³⁸ In these cases, the focus was not on the personal view of the director but on the technical abilities of the performers: after discovering the ‘right’ style of “moon-drenched landscapes, broken love affairs and exquisite plangency” (Senelick, 1997: 144), and in the style of Shakespearian productions such as the 1935 John Gielgud version of *Romeo and Juliet* (where John Gielgud and Laurence Olivier alternated the roles of Romeo and Mercutio [Smallwood, 2002: 102]), the only excitement could come from the shifts of tone and speech that famous thespians applied to their interpretations, delimited by similar stagings of slow tempos and crepuscular lighting.

Just like Shakespeare, then, Chekhov became really important for the UK; a member of a canonical national tradition, whose established qualities belonged to a critical establishment. Even those productions that explored different interpretations were judged –positively or negatively– against the background of the ‘classic’, even ‘correct’ interpretation. In a similar way Stanislavsky’s versions had become the first iconic Russian productions, Komis’s were progressively transformed by the British imagined community –with the help of, for example, the reviews published in the printed press of the time such as *The Times*, *Daily Express* and *Sunday Times*– into milestones, inspirations for many (if not all) future Chekhovian stagings.

This indicated also an aristocratic desire: a wish to go back in time, to reinvigorate and celebrate those forces and customs that –in the past– had allowed the preservation of strongly differentiated

³⁸ Figures like Olivier were capital in the preservation of the discourses first applied to Chekhov by Komisarjevsky: other actors that could be connected to them were John Gielgud, regular collaborator of Komis’s productions, and Peggy Ashcroft, also his collaborator and (between 1934 and 1936) his wife. Director Michel Saint-Denis, too, created a similar nostalgic-imperial tradition in France and later on preserved it as co-director of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

What is particularly interesting about these notions, however, is the fact that –as they became ‘traditional’– they were maintained without a serious discussion of their socio-political implications by scholars and practitioners, including directors that in other fields of their art showed progressive tendencies. Peter Hall – analysed in the next section of the present work– is a revealing example.

social classes. As the theatre critic Kenneth Tynan disparagingly remarked in 1958, “Who put the [cobwebs] there? (...) Ourselves. (...) We have remade Chekhov’s last play in our image (...) Our *Cherry Orchard* is a pathetic symphony, to be played in a mood of elegy” (Tynan, 1961: 433). This ‘we’, of course, did not embrace all possible citizens or audience members: it described a view of a certain public, artists and/or newspaper readers that cherished Chekhov but who had come to understand him through a very aristocratic and hierarchised reading. This was connected to the fact that many commercial Chekhovian shows gathered –and still do, despite many historical changes and new interpretations– the *crème de la crème* of the British stage: for a couple of hours, especially for those who inhabited the best boxes and could afford the expensive programmes, it was enchanting to embrace a world where sadness and melodic qualities were expressed by a selected collection of characters.³⁹ The changes seen in the streets, at least in these more conventional productions, could be forgotten within a universe of ‘purity’, which expressed a restrictive notion of British national identity that was increasingly being challenged by the arrival of new historical changes and theatrical forces.⁴⁰

Indeed, since the end of World War II in 1945, a variety of discourses started to radically change the social panorama of the country. Accelerated transformations occurred in rapid succession: the post-war restoration –led by Clement Attlee’s nationalisation politics and health and welfare reforms– brought political stability and productive success, but also an incremented reception of social forces. “22000 Anglo-American children” were the result of the relationship between nationals and some members of the million and a half American troops; “345000 European nationals were recruited for work” in the reconstruction of every target bombarded by the Germans (Winder, 2004: 328, 331).

³⁹ This was not exclusive of Chekhov, of course; what it is revealing is how this reading was commonly applied to many playwrights at the time.

⁴⁰ This transformative quality was already suggested in the Chekhovian dramas; its thematic relevance, though, was neutralized by interpretations where aristocratic characters were emphasised and working class figures ‘prettified’ or minimised.

Also, partly as a reaction against the Nazi ideology and mainly as a process of socio-economic self-recognition, the member nations of the UK started “a process of disintegration of the British idea into more compact units of pride which emphasised identities that [could] plausibly be projected as non-English” (Winder, 2004: 355); Welsh and Scottish populations strengthened their sense of distinctiveness in a context of unstable unity, revealing the transitional and ever changing nature of the nation as described by many authors in subsequent years (e.g. Bhabha, 1990).

This was just part of a wider global transformation: the 1948 Nationality Act, which “created the conditions that facilitated a mass migration of New Commonwealth citizens to the United Kingdom” and “bequeathed to subsequent policy-makers a legal framework that shaped (...) their ability to articulate a policy response to this migration”, reinforced a process that was naturally accelerating all over the world due to the increasing speed of communications and the inevitable –and not always desired– dialogues among countries (Hansen, 2000: 35). The late 1940s and the 1950s saw the arrival of many Indian and West Indian immigrants, who were recruited as a cheap working force in exchange for an opportunity beyond the possibilities of their own motherlands; they filled the gap created by the loss of a generation in the brutality of the bombings and trenches.⁴¹ The 1948 arrival of the *Empire Windrush*, which brought 492 Jamaican passengers who had escaped from poverty and overpopulation, is symbolic of the desire of thousands of foreigners, who saw the UK as a land of opportunities. Many cultures entered the country and started transforming its local identity: only in the last four months of 1957 “the net arrival (i.e. total arrivals minus departures) from the West Indies was (...) 7074, (...) while the net arrival from India was (...) 1508” (Hansen, 2000: 90); by 1958, “according to Home Office estimates, 210,000 people from the Commonwealth [were] living and working in Britain”; and other Asian and African settlers obtained their stay allowance thanks to

⁴¹ In 1956, for instance, “London transport resolved to recruit nearly four thousand new employees, mostly from Barbados” (Winder, 2004: 352).

relatives that were already living in the country (Winder, 2004: 362). Undoubtedly, an accelerated social change was taking place; one that probably would have increased had it not been for the Commonwealth Immigrants Act passed on July 1 1962, which limited immigration processes for the next thirty years.

The pervasive introduction of new cultures also influenced the realm of drama (and, by extension, the interpretation of Chekhovian plays). The 'angry young man' generation was the most representative: a group of writers that, collaborating with independent theatres such as the Royal Court and its artistic director George Devine, tried to open the British stage to international European influences, and 'de-glamorize' the stage in order to project "a picture of British life that was gritty and down-to-earth", exposing the rough sides of social reality (Sierz, 2011: 17). These stances might appear contradictory, especially when comparing the abstract dramatic perspectives of Sartre to the specificity of language and social critique found in Arnold Wesker's first plays; however, Harold Pinter's creations indicated the occasional (and not necessarily equal) combination of existentialist views of the post-war *avant-garde* with an acute recognition of political and psychological unrest.

This did not necessarily eliminate a degree of nationalistic elitism: as Aleks Sierz argues in *Rewriting the Nation*, "at its worst [this discourse] required an embattled little-Englander feeling, (...) a bulwark against fancy foreign muck (...) [that] in its rhetoric could easily be anti-gay and anti-female" (Sierz, 2000: 18); in other words, this 'revolutionary' generation still supported the domination of more conservative discourses, dressed only in a more unpolished package. But at least there was a general protest against social inequality and the huge economic differences between regions: *Look Back in Anger* explored the poverty and class confrontation in the East Midlands as an example of a wider problematic; *The Kitchen* followed the difficulties of cultural exchange through the love affair

of a German chef and an English waitress, as understood through the perspective of a Jewish playwright; and *Roots* explored anti-Semitism and the contradictions of an accelerated, unequal industrialized development.⁴² It was a new view that allowed a socio-aesthetic analysis of the poorest social classes, while adding a degree of realism to the previously sanitized world of the stage, as well as the first glimpses of the more complex intercultural dialogues that would be developed later on. The socio-political disappointment, obliquely alluded to in the enchanting British Chekhovian stagings (where progressive characters were secondary to the ‘tragic’ situation of the aristocrats), was not covered anymore with a patina of romanticism: it was exposed with all of its aggression and repressed anxiety.

This dramatic perspective also transformed the interpretation of the most ‘canonical’ creations of the repertoire: Shakespeare, for instance, was creatively reinterpreted as a social author, with satiric and sexual undercurrents, as in the “empty space (...), brilliantly lit white box, trapezes and circus-based costumes” of the 1970 version of *Midsummer’s Night Dream* directed by Peter Brook (Smallwood, 2002: 111); Chekhov, as it will be seen below, became too a space for different theatrical explorations. Interestingly, in this last case the productions that helped to trigger such a change were –yet again– foreign, presented in their original languages. First there was the 1958 London tour of the MAT, with their versions of *Three Sisters*, *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard*: although from a Russian perspective they might have looked more like imposing relics than refreshing takes on the plays –with only the latter one being a new production and the other two dating from 1940 and 1947 respectively–, they produced a minor stir within a critical and artistic

⁴² This would cast long shadows that playwrights from other regions would adopt years later: twenty years later, the Scottish writer John Byrne depicted in *The Slab Boys* the underdevelopment of Scotland at the end of the 1950s; left behind by the industrialized Southern region of the country, it was only possible to embrace a stronger sense of belonging and a rejection of those ‘bloody’ Englishmen that did not seem to understand or care for their basic living standards.

community that was not used to the 'real', practical application of Stanislavskian principles.⁴³ It was revealing to discover the 'naturalist' and matter-of-fact portrayal of the plays, "with the suitability of the ensemble style for highlighting the complex counterpoint of the dramatic structure" (Marsh, 1993: 114). Also, and perhaps inevitably, social subtexts were put forward with sharp intensity: nothing less could have come from a troupe of actors who, despite the relative freedom given by Khrushchev's Thaw⁴⁴, still carried in their memories the oppression of the Stalinist regime and the brutal realisation of the changes intuited by some Chekhovian characters. Tynan, perhaps affected by the facts that the dialogues were in Russian and that he only fully perceived the visual side of the performance, sensed it when he exclaimed "how these actors eat; and listen; and fail to listen; and grunt and exist, roundly and egocentrically exist! (...) We act with our voices, they with their lives" (Tynan, 436).⁴⁵ Unexpectedly –especially for those who still believed in a Komisarjevsky-Stanislavski connection– audiences were confronted with a more expressive style of acting, where a conscious social aplomb was intensified through a 'realism' that was eminently theatrical; an exalted state of interpretation that highlighted the thoughts of all the characters –Trofimov's meaningful philosophical musings, Lopakhin's contradictory emotions regarding his roots and future– and

⁴³ *Three Sisters* had been originally mounted by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, while *Uncle Vanya* had been directed by Mikhail Kedrov: both, while preferring a more tragicomic tone rather than the tragic one used by Stanislavsky's first stagings, still used the realist style of performance first developed by the company at the turn of the century (Marsh, 1993: 114).

⁴⁴ At the time the Soviet Union undertook many important reforms, such as a partial opening of the country to cultural and sports events, an attack on the excesses of Stalinism and a certain liberalization of the censorship. However, the country's centralism and oppressive cultural methods still prevailed, and were partly reinstated after Khrushchev was removed as Soviet leader in October 1964.

⁴⁵ Although the production (presented at a time before simultaneous translation) was linguistically inaccessible for those who did not speak Russian, it cannot be said that it was totally obscure for English-speaking members of the audience. Considering that many of them already knew well the plot and characters of the plays due to either reading or watching previous stagings, Chekhov's works could be considered in fact as dramatic bridges, presenting a common base of understanding for the two cultures while at the same time highlighting their aesthetic-political differences.

symbolised an aesthetic posture that embodied social tragedies and disappointments as opposed to one that privileged the creation of narcotic escapisms.⁴⁶

A more powerful shock, which also opened new artistic frontiers, was created by a production presented eleven years later, in the context of the World Theatre Season organised by Peter Daubeny and the Royal Shakespeare Company: Otomar Krejča's *Three Sisters*, performed by the Prague company *Divadlo Za Branou* (Theatre Beyond the Gates). The political situation was crucial: at the moment of its London presentation, on 28 June 1969, not even a year had passed after the August 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Originally staged in 1965, the production had seen the rise and fall of the period of hope and liberalization represented by the Prague Spring; more than ever, the Eastern European country faced a bleak and uncertain future. This no doubt influenced the 1969 performance, reinforcing the edge present in the original text and highlighting the perspective already attempted by the company: following Maxim Gorky's idea that Chekhov was able "to reveal in the dim sea of banality its tragic humour; (...) [its] cruel and disgusting things, behind the humorous words and situations" (Gorky, 1921), Krejča aimed for a deglamourized and unsentimental –although not unsympathetic– interpretation of the characters, underlining the disharmony between the sisters and creating a harsh display of desperation and disillusion. A fierce sense of physicality and a grey-tinted, geometrically-simplified décor by Josef Svoboda were also part of a staging where "exteriors and interiors blended, and the external world was always visibly present" (Aronson, 2000: 139), in a shattering remembrance of the pervasive influence of social events in the most intimate interpersonal relationships; particularly revelatory was the kinetic end

⁴⁶ This posture immediately influenced the staging of works inspired by the Russian author: in 1959 –that is, a year later– the Royal Court premiered *Don Juan in the Russian Manner*, a heavily reworked adaptation of the untitled 1878 play written by a teenage Chekhov. Considering that its plot revolves around the intimate disappointment of a previously idealist schoolmaster, it is not too hard to link it with the realist approach of the MAT and the disillusionment of the creators of the 'kitchen-sink drama': revealingly, the production "featured the urbane Shavian actor Rex Harrison in the lead part" (Loehlin, 2010: 68).

of the piece, with the sisters whirling around a Chebutkhin played by Krejča himself, incapable of finding peace in their own monologues of a better future. Perhaps inevitably, this complex and sad closure produced “an inferiority complex about the old-fashioned approaches to Chekhov perpetrated in the West End” (Senelick, 1997: 309); in a 60s era of rock, decolonisation and anti-war movements, new directors tried to disavow the romantic tendency and favour more daring visions of the Russian author, reinterpreting him in similar fashion to what was happening at the same time to Shakespeare in productions such as the 1965 Charles Marowitz’s version of *Hamlet*, which in a “90-minute ‘collage’ assembled from different scenes of Shakespeare’s original play” posited a “highly unromantic version of the lead character”, seen through the prism of his “mentally besieged consciousness” (Wyver, 2013).

The 1970s started then for British Chekhovian productions a time for experimentation that went beyond realism and confronted Komis-esque stagings and their implicit conservatism (although his influence, as it will be shown, would still be felt in many future Chekhovian stagings). Two elements were recurrent: first, an exalted comic vein, ranging from sweet mockery to brutal irony; second, a stronger social reading, which dismissed the ‘period-costume’ feeling of traditional performances in favour of specific local discourses. Perhaps director-physician Jonathan Miller –whose two professions echoed those of Chekhov– was one of the first to openly explore both perspectives, mixing in his *Seagull* (1973) and *Cherry Orchard* (1976) traits such as dialogue overlapping and decorative sparseness with a Dickensian characterization: through a ‘reduction’ of the protagonists into revealing stereotypes, he rediscovered the farcical rhythm, “idle chatter and the comic surface of social interaction” of the previously revered aristocratic characters (Miller, 1993: 139). This certainly wouldn’t have been possible without the aggressive approach achieved by Krejča; but it also drew on Boris Livanov’s 1968 MAT interpretation of the *Seagull*, presented in 1970 at the Aldwych Theatre as part of the World Theatre Season (further emphasising the physicality of the

Russian approach first revealed to British audiences during the late 1950s). Indeed, both directors used the same piece –one whose core is a reflection on art and the confrontation of established and new discourses– as a basic point for their renovating approaches; sharing a desire for an openly ‘theatrical’ staging, both attempted to break deeply-rooted traditions of their own societies with the help of a foreign cultural discourse. Emphasising an intertheatrical connection already present in the original script, Libanov connected his version to *Hamlet*, underlining the closeness between Treplev and the Danish prince and turning the show into a claustrophobic exploration of the challenges faced by a young artist; meanwhile, Miller tried to find the “eruptive gaiety that is characteristic of Russians” through an intense expression of emotions that mocked the occasional artistic self-importance seen in the most traditional views of artistry (Miller, 1993: 139). Naturally, the interest was not to fully *imitate* a foreign perspective; the final goal was to acquire a critical position through the use of external legacies that ultimately *reinforced* their own dramatic interests. In the case of Miller, this explosion of feelings very much reflected the desire of the younger generation to leave behind those cultural patterns that had built the stereotype of the repressed British citizen, replacing them with a full-on mockery on social conventions and a celebration of emotionality: a society very much in tune with the rhythms of May 1968 and the Beatles revolution.

Krejča’s influence in the development of new cultural identities can also be noticed in a 1977 version of *The Cherry Orchard*, adapted by Trevor Griffiths for the Nottingham Playhouse and directed by Richard Eyre: an early example of a global trend, supported mainly in the UK by stable theatrical troupes, of renovating Chekhov through the creation of translations written by recognised artists in collaboration with Russian-speaking translators. The resulting versions were used to enhance or reinforce particular interpretations chosen by the directors: Griffiths’ version, for instance, emphasised the political tone of the piece, “the sense of a society in flux (...) about to be turned upside down” (Allen, 1993: 157), and twisted it into a prophetic drama where the characters of

Trofimov and Lopakhin became rational and physical expressions of an upcoming Marxist utopia. This was no doubt influenced by the then liberal political atmosphere represented in the Labour government of James Callaghan (1976-1979), as well by the impact of a new, committed generation of playwrights such as Howard Brenton and David Hare, whose leftist ideological positions produced for instance important dramatic collaborations like the epic satire *Brassneck* (1973).⁴⁷ It was an appropriate historical context to present a British Chekhovian production that embraced an understanding of Chekhov that some Soviet companies (different from Stanislavsky's) had embraced after the October Revolution; a reading previously feared in the capitalistic British society, where the brutal excesses of the Stalinist regime had been used to undermine communist ideologies. These postures, in fact, still influenced the critical reception of the play: Griffiths was accused of making a "forced or unnatural 'grafting' purely for the sake of left wing ideology", ignoring that Chekhov himself had been forced to cut some dialogue due to the pressures of censorship (Gottlieb, 1993: 147).⁴⁸ A precedent, however, had already been established.

The trend to introduce Chekhov into the realm of social clashes, while at the same time making him more attuned to the aesthetic transformations of the time, continued and became even more direct during the 1980s. At the same time as the academic world saw the origins of the theorization of intercultural studies, and with the strengthening of literary postmodernism, Chekhov's stagings moved beyond their 'romantic' limitations and became bases for a myriad of cultural commentaries; rather than just adapt the text through the use of contemporary slang or the Anglicization of certain characters' names, British authors and directors 'disrespected' the canonical integrity of the pieces

⁴⁷ This play is particularly important because of the way it attempted to capture the transformation of British national identity between 1945 and the early 1970s, as expressed through "meteoric ups and downs of a self-seeking Midlands family" (Billington, 2007: 213).

⁴⁸ In 1903, Chekhov wrote to his wife Olga Knipper "I am most worried about a certain unfinished quality about the student Trofimov. You see, Trofimov is in exile from time to time, and again thrown out of University, but how can these things be represented?" (quoted by Allen, 1993: 158). This proves that the Russian author was very aware of the political implications of the character's discourse.

and remade them, mixing them with other artistic traditions, transforming their geographical contexts and radically changing them in fashions that echoed similar experimentations with Shakespeare at the time (one of the most extreme being Michael Bodganov's 1978 production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, where the main character pretended to be a sexist drunk who "made his weaving way on to the stage" before "attacking a beautiful, proper set" and physically deconstructing it [Kennedy, 2001: 2]). The works of Mike Alfreds, created between 1981 and 1986 with his company Shared Experience, responded mainly to the first interest: fully accepting the 'foreign' quality of the pieces, while at the same time understanding the British origin of his cast, the director created a world where "action and thus comedy emanated from the actors, stressing the characters - and hence their responsibility for their own lives", in a satiric grotesquerie not too distant from the tradition of Gogol and Dickens (Gottlieb, 2001). Far from a mere exotic desire, where the plays could be transformed in glamorous concoctions that exploited a pretended 'mystery' of the 'barbaric' East, Alfreds created a syncretic space where easily definable interpretations could not be achieved, and the creative improvisation of the actors could lead to a constant re-exploration of the play. This was due to his working methods, centred in the physical expression of the actors and their "points of concentration" –specific events or actions used as organisers of a dramatic sequence– rather than in a directorial blocking of moves or an interpretative imposition "of particular moments and scenes" (Young, 1993: 172). From a political view, this could have been seen as a fresh twist on the then growing understanding of the 'nation' as a neoliberal collection of individual endeavours and solitary entrepreneurial successes, epitomized in the UK by the famous quote "[People] are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first" (Thatcher, 1987): namely, a theatrical view inspired by a political perspective where any idea of

State regulation was considered harmful and unnecessary to economic development. It could be considered ironic, then, that Alfreds' most celebrated creation, a *Cherry Orchard* production at the National Theatre in 1986, was the most controlled, one which occasionally used "the sort of deadly routines Alfreds abhorred" (Young, 172). Despite the efforts of Ian McKellen in the role of Lopakhin –giving a volcanic performance during the four-month run–, many actors "formularized" their interpretations, "fixing the interpretation of a particular episode"; also, "stage-hands were used" and "the set concealed the wings", denying Alfred's insistence "on the audience's awareness of [the] transformation" of an actor into someone else (Young, 1993: 172, 175-176). Perhaps this is understandable if the ultimately sardonic approach of the director is grasped: one where the satiric and non-conformist personality of the playwright was presented, using a controlled improvisation as a way to keep his main themes constantly fresh and changing. An approach where an established acting routine had to be prepared and fixed beforehand clashed with these intentions, and ultimately indicated the preservation of more conventional traditions within the national stage.

Post-colonial political perspectives were also presented at this point⁴⁹: views where the cultural centres of the nation were confronted with the legacies of imperial control and colonialism, forcing national identity to be re-constructed with the contribution of previously suppressed voices. Two shows are recognisable as examples: first, the 1981 *Seagull* adaptation written by Thomas Kilroy, which transferred the action to Ireland and compared the decadence of Russian gentry to that of "the Anglo-Irish landowning class (...), swept away in the foundation and later development of the new Irish state in the first decades of the twentieth century" (Kilroy, 2000: 81); second, the 1988 Mustapha Matura play *Trinidad Sisters*, an adaptation of the 1901 play into a World War II Caribbean

⁴⁹ These readings had started years before, as it can be seen for example with Krejca's production and its criticism of Soviet control; regarding the specific case of British Chekhovian productions, however, only until this decade this position became a trend and influenced many local creations.

context of political instability, class-based injustice and colonial domination. Taking a step further the processes of dramatic and cultural intermixture, these productions went beyond transforming the staging to also emphasise deep alterations in the *text* in order to reflect foreign discourses, indicating points of contact and dissent with the new political agendas controlled by the former Empire; despite their cultural differences, they suggested that post-industrial Britain was seen by the colonized with a mixture of hatred, envy and desire. Ultimately, both became metaphors of the interest of dominated cultures to enter into the realm of their previous enslaver, to break what W. E. B. Du Bois called in 1903 the “double consciousness (...) this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (quoted by Black, 2007: 394). Instead, they aimed to create that “space for debate, dissent and a coming together of multiple perspectives” mentioned by Nadine Holdsworth (2010: 71), and to receive –at least on a discursive level– a compensation for the exploitation to which they had been subjected throughout many generations. A difficult question lingered in the air: were British citizens ready to accept their responsibilities and share with others the fruits of their economic development?

Perhaps the disturbing urgency of this message explains why these committed stagings were not – and still aren’t– as frequent as other, more classical interpretations.⁵⁰ The bucolic view of a ‘lost’ aristocratic England remained in the psyche of many audience members and artists, affecting both

⁵⁰ Both Kilroy’s and Matura’s versions were premiered in venues with strong political affiliations: 1981’s *The Seagull* was directed by the then artistic director of the Royal Court, Max Stafford-Clark, who had started his directorial career connected to the *Joint Stock* company and the leftist theatrical circle represented by playwrights like David Hare and Howard Brenton; meanwhile, *Trinidad Sisters* was commissioned by the Tricycle Theatre, which since its creation in 1980 has presented socially committed material (a relatively recent one being the 2011 verbatim theatre play *The Riots*). Despite their critical recognition and subsidized support from the State, however, none of these spaces have the stage capacity or media impact of a West End theatre or the National Theatre: bigger and more commercially-orientated locations that have repeatedly tamed new interpretations –consider again Griffiths’ NT production– in favour of more conventional approaches, occasionally disguised as ‘fresh’ interpretations with the help of a new translation or an innovative décor but still carriers of a nostalgic-political agenda.

dramatic revivals (as the next chapter of this work will indicate) and new dramatic creations (Jezz Butterworth's *Jerusalem*, for example, presented "the spectacle of a 'true' Englishman as the last of a doomed species" [Cavendish, 2010]); crossing over many historical periods—and reinforced by the neoliberal and capitalist policies of Thatcherism—, a conservative atmosphere and a sense of nationalist belonging was defended with recurrent intensity, up to the historical shift represented by Brexit. Mike Alfreds, for example, was accused by Michael Coveney in the *Financial Times* of creating "a music hall burlesque featuring a bunch of neurasthenics", ignoring the improvisational elements of the director (quoted by Young, 1993: 175). Also, in the field of rewritings or adaptations of the original Chekhovian dramas, where a bolder approach could have been accepted, the most successful pieces were those that respected many of the most traditional perspectives: Michael Frayn's *Wild Honey*, a re-visitation of Chekhov's first untitled play (written in 1878 and never finished), was a clever satiric rewriting that took everything that was "rough and inchoate in the original" and "polished [it] into a neat piece of boulevard stagecraft" (Senelick, 1997: 320) that was warmly received by British critics but failed outside of London, as in New York where a reviewer noticed a "prevailing air of artifice", as well as the "Gogolian exaggeration" of Ian McKellen's central performance that "eventually crosse[d] the line into camp" (Rich, 1986). In the UK, though, the positive reception of Frayn's version carried (and at least partly demonstrated) the continuation of a specific political yearning: to diminish the presence on the stage of certain historical developments, and to embrace instead a comfortable escapism full of burlesque and emotional simplifications.

This did not prevent the growing appearance of new interpretations: with the arrival of the 1990s, the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, a renovated globalisation accelerated the process started in the 1960s, allowing the entrance of novel forces into the theatrical discourse and offering more visibility to smaller companies. In the last twenty years, and entering properly into

the 21st century, long-lasting and seemingly well-established monolithic views faced more flexible and openly intercultural interpretations of 'Britishness', where artists from different cultures, countries and/or creative backgrounds assembled in hybrid productions that aimed to underline their aesthetic and technical diversity. Remarkable examples of this include the 1990 *Three Sisters*, starring the Redgrave sisters and directed by the Georgian director Robert Sturua; the 1994 *Uncle Vanya* adaptation *August*, written by Julian Mitchell and directed by and starring Anthony Hopkins, which relocated the action to the shores of North Wales; the 1997 Russian-German co-production of *Platonov* by the Maly Theatre of St Petersburg, presented at the Barbican; and the 2007 version of *Three Sisters* by British-Russian company Cheek by Jowl. All of them showed the presentation and consolidation of new views of national identity, underlining the 'relativization' of hegemonic forces within the context of an increasing diversity: Sturua, for example, did not try to find a generic style appropriate for a presumably monolithic 'British audience' –as Komisarjevsky had done seven decades before–, but projected his aesthetic preferences "influenced intellectually by Bakhtin's work on Rabelais and pictorially by Tumanishvili and Toulouse-Lautrec" on a staging that offered a "carnival ambience" (Senelick, 1997: 348-349) while respecting the acting style of his British actresses, Vanessa, Lynn and Jemma Redgrave.

Cultural variety was turned into an important element; at a time of increasing competition, where new immigrant communities entered into the realm of the country –between 2004 and 2009, for example, the number of Polish-born people living in the UK raised from 90,000 to 500,000 people (Office for National Statistics, 2011)– it became necessary for theatrical companies and creators to widen the canvas and offer an assortment of shows where the diversity of the country could be properly explored. Chekhovian productions, due to their variety reached after years of reinterpretations, was an ideal (if not unique) place to explore these issues; at the same time the Royal Shakespeare Company was presenting the Complete Works Project (2006-7), where the

entirety of the Bard's work was staged by a mixture of national and international artists that included Peter Stein, Yukio Ninagawa and companies from "South and North America, the Middle East, Asia, Africa and right across Europe" (Tilden, 2005), Chekhov (as the aforementioned shows indicated) was also an ideal vessel to transmit many cultural dialogues and transformations. Parallel to this, 'classical' interpretations of the Russian author remained –and still do– in the repertory, revealing not only the perpetuation in some quarters of traditional perspectives, but the undeniable relevance of these conservative readings within the 21st century British national identity. All together, they create a complex tapestry that in many ways reflect the contemporary position of the country as a multicultural society where diverse communities coexist and intermix; due to the growing expansion of independent and/or experimental companies, new perspectives are being offered every day. In the case of the Russian writer, they are connected to what Vera Gottlieb (2001) named as "rough Chekhov", that is, a recuperation and exaltation of the "spikes" of the author through an "anti-authoritarian, anti-tradition, anti-pomp, anti-pretence" approach which proves "that the plays are ambivalent and tough enough to take radical re-appraisal and offer living contemporary perceptions", effectively widening the understanding of the constant construction of cultural identities. Opposed to right-wing political ideologies, these shows suggested that a fuller comprehension of the country could be found in the establishment of a dialogue between more traditional views justified by a sense of nostalgia and novel discourses where a global flux of cultural offerings coexisted, allowing the creation of the rhizomatic and multiple interculturalities mentioned by Knowles (2009: 61) and shaping a richer sense of the morphing present and future of the entire British society.

Chapter One: Anton Chekhov, William Shakespeare and Terence Rattigan as expressions of conservative ideas of national identity

1. Introduction

As presented at the beginning of this thesis, this first chapter will focus on the analysis of two double bill productions presented in 2009: Peter Hall Company's versions of *Swansong* and Terence Rattigan's *The Browning Version*, and Sam Mendes' pairing of *The Cherry Orchard* and Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* as the opening season of his British-American company The Bridge Project. According to the interpretation proposed throughout the next pages, both pairings shared a conservative approach in their understanding of Chekhov's theatrical techniques and messages, as well as in their view of contemporary British national identity: due to a series of appropriations and reinterpretations, and despite their different aesthetic preferences, these Chekhovian shows revealed a social view focused on the preservation of political and cultural traditions, as well as a return to a nostalgic past that dodged the intercultural challenges of a more polyvalent society present at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Their connection to two important British writers through double billing –one connecting two one-act creations, the other two classic full-length shows– is essential: by positioning the Russian writer next to “a cultural hero, (...) a transcendent genius and omniscient seer” who has become a “cultural industry” that mixes national identification and touristic celebration (Holderness, 1988: 5-12), and to a realist writer whose career flourished in the last years of the Empire, Hall and Mendes respectively preserved –through diverse staging techniques and directorial preferences– the position of Chekhov as an assimilated defender of traditional values, and proposed a continuity that is important within the theatrical arena, but

that taken alone might lead to a reductionist view of the complexities faced by the country at an important period of its history.

The present chapter will consider then both Chekhovian productions as part of a similar socio-political discourse regarding national identity. It will contextualise them within the intertheatrical framework of previous productions, the historical situation of the country at the time of their presentation, and the careers and creative backgrounds of directors Peter Hall and Sam Mendes; considering their nature as double bills and dissecting their constituting elements, including their final critical reception, the resulting analysis will show a view of the important yet (taking into consideration other readings considered in the following chapters of this work) limited universe of 'traditional' productions of Chekhov within the UK. Also, the following section will consider the methods through which specific creators like Shakespeare, Rattigan or Chekhov, due to a mixture of critical consensus, socio-economic agendas and public reception, are turned into artistic 'institutions' that go beyond biographical or personal constraints and end up representing monolithic discourses that limit the discussion of the UK's cultural diversity and its necessity of intercultural communication.

2. Monologues and traditions: Peter Hall Company's *Swansong* and *The Browning Version* (13 July – 1 August 2009)

In 2009, when the Peter Hall Company presented the double bill of Chekhov's *Swansong* and Terence Rattigan's *The Browning Version* as the opening show of that year's season, theatre critics were slightly disappointed: Michael Billington (2009) from *The Guardian* noticed the "relatively quiet start" nature of the mixture, while Michael Coveney (2009) from *The Independent* openly criticised the lack of an "obvious connection between these plays". This reaction could be explained,

perhaps, in the selection of the shows: as an initial statement of what promised to be another interesting theatrical exploration by one of Britain's most recognised directors, the mixture seemed minor-key and even somewhat weak. After all, although it was well-known by audiences, having been presented –among other places– in Derby (2002), Birmingham (2006) and Oxford (2007) during the first decade of the 21st century, Rattigan's play seemed to lack the economic pull and dramatic complexity of earlier seasons' openers such as 2008's "world premiere of Nicki Frei's new adaptation of *The Portrait of a Lady*" (Paddock, 2008); meanwhile, Chekhov's short sketch was a relatively obscure creation with a seemingly feeble plot, which did not even seem to fit with a selection of productions that in that particular year included "the world premiere of *Another Door Closed*, Peter Gill's first new play in six years, directed by Gill himself, (...) revivals of classics by (...) Bernard Shaw and more modern plays by Michael Frayn and David Storey" (Paddock, 2009).

A more informed analysis, however, reveals that the combination responded to both practical and ideological concerns that are characteristic of director Peter Hall's career. First of all, the presence of Peter Bowles, nationally known as the protagonist of the iconic sitcom *To the Manor Born* and a recurrent presence on primetime television in supporting roles, must be considered: playing both the aged actor Svetlovidov in the Russian work and the teacher Crocker-Harris in the British one, his presence was a definite centre around which the whole evening was structured. The 'baffling' selection of *Swansong* responded then to a specific directorial desire to showcase the talents of this most talented thespian, first positioning him in a more comfortable satiric-comic territory –some sort of 'warm-up' for his assets– and later in a tragic and more unexpected turn that –at least hypothetically– should have surprised and captivated potential audiences. Also, this decision revealed a desire to connect, through a popular yet decisively old-fashioned figure, the work of two authors and their specific views of the world, as filtered through the theatrical education and sensitivities of their director. After all, it cannot be dismissed the importance of presenting a

Chekhov play, being the *only* foreign drama presented that year by Hall's company: a trend that followed all previous seasons, where always one carefully selected international work had become an interpretative guide to the other plays, and put into dialogue with a series of Shakespearean works and 20th century realist British dramas.⁵¹ Its presence responded to an ideological and aesthetic desire: beyond the specificity of the particular work his *name* also mattered, especially when considering all the symbolic and political connotations it had acquired in the UK.⁵² Compared to a nostalgic and nationalistic view of Rattigan, the assimilated Chekhov was used to construct and reinforce a discourse that mixed calculated risks with popular appeal, aesthetic 'prestige', economic marketability and political pragmatism.

By 2009, this combination should not have surprised anyone: it was a trademark of Hall's theatrical style. Starting his career in the middle 1950s, when audiences yearned "for laughter, lightness and gaiety" (Billington, 2007: 45), he initially faced a theatrical environment where traditional dramatic structures represented by Noel Coward and –revealingly– Terence Rattigan were challenged by authors like John Whiting, who recognised a universe of "violence, anarchy and chaos" that envisaged "the possibility of social disintegration" (Billington, 2007: 53). This contradiction was no doubt due to the warlike context of the previous decade; perhaps because of the survival mentality of his generation, Hall ended up becoming a director that preferred commercial dramatic possibilities over more personal perspectives. Directing semi-professional productions at the University of Cambridge, his style naturally possessed a pragmatic and workmanlike quality: as journalist Joan Bakewell would remember years later, "I remember him being very unobtrusive but

⁵¹ Representative examples are 2006's season, which complemented Strindberg's *Miss Julie* with Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Alan Bennett's *Habeas Corpus* and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (Paddock 2006); and the 2008's line-up, which mixed Ibsen's *A Doll's House* with the aforementioned adaptation of *Portrait of a Lady*, Alan Bennett's *Enjoy* and Peter Nichols' *Born in the Gardens* (Paddock 2008).

⁵² The choice of a different 'international' artist does not diminish their individual importance: quite the opposite, it reveals the value of their discourses within the British theatrical discourse, and the way they were used by Hall to reflect on different socio-political issues of the time.

very present. (...) He was very practical” (O’Mahoney, 2005). This approach quickly positioned him in the theatrical market, leading to his designation as the artistic director of the Arts Theatre in London at the age of 24. It was there when, in 1955, the script of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* landed on his desk; he found it “highly original because of the idea of waiting as a metaphor of life (...), terribly funny and well written and (...) [with] a marvellous rhythm to it”, but without realizing that “this is the epoch-changing play of the mid-century” (O’Mahoney, 2005). This is revealing in the sense that it exposed a mainstream posture where, more than in any desire for ground-breaking or avant-garde explorations, the focus was on the search for entertainment, dramatic fluidity and general appeal. As a skilled inheritor of these views, Hall managed to apparently confront the conservative view of the artist as “purveyor of harmless pleasure or truth-bearing prophet” (Billington, 2007: 83), exposing British dramaturgy to international theatrical trends, while at the same time using the polarised critical response to his advantage to achieve a respectable box-office success.

An even more significant challenge was taken in what was perhaps his most relevant achievement: the creation of a national theatre. Considering drama’s historical relevance within the UK as a collective device useful for the transmission and discussion of ideas, at the end of the 1950s there was a belated necessity to build a unified dramatic company that –according to Hall himself– could “take into account the fact that we have had a World War... and that everything in the world had changed –values, ways of living, ideals, hopes and fears” (quoted by Chambers, 2004: 9). The desire had been present since the beginning of the century, but had never materialized due to governmental disinterest and internal fights between theatrical troupes: Hall simply appropriated it, mixed it with the mercantile and traditional values represented by Shakespeare and, parallel and in competition with Laurence Olivier’s creation of the National Theatre, took “a star-laden, six-month (...) festival” at Stratford-upon-Avon and turned it into “a monumental, year-round operation

built around a permanent company, a London base and contemporary work from home and abroad” (Billington, 2007: 133). The establishment of a stable troupe of actors, as opposed to the more common model of hired-for-a-play performers, was justified as a “prerequisite for creating a vibrant theatre of reanimated Shakespeare and vital new and modern plays presented in an invigorating symbiosis” (Chambers, 2004: 12-13): a support for the ensemble over the individual that managed to reinvigorate the traditional view of the Bard as the centre of national identity, while at the same time mirroring progressive political trends of the time that aimed to build a Benedict Anderson-esque ‘imagined community’ where past traditions and new cultural discourses –in a process of exchange and dialogue– could create a new understanding of what it meant to be British.

These complexities and tensions still remained at the core of Hall’s 2009 season in Bath. The idea of the necessity of a “permanent company” had by then been rejected for both monetary reasons and a new personal position that related those ideas to a sense of “dogma” and creative death (Miles, 1993: 190); however, in his position as the central producer and organiser of a yearly season, as well as in his full communication with actors and other members of the theatrical ensemble, there was still a certain defence of creative collectivism. Also, his desire to explore the complexities of the country remained seemingly undeterred: as it was pointed before, all of his seasons at the Theatre Royal Bath had been focused around the work of British and Irish authors. In the year of the presentation of the double bill *Swansong - The Browning Version*, for example, the selection also included *The Apple Cart* by Shaw, Frayn’s *Balmoral*, Storey’s *Home* and Hill’s *Another Door Closed*: although Hall himself only directed the first two productions, all of them showed a unified artistic exploration –through different angles and perspectives– of the social and political contradictions of 20th and 21st century Britain. Shaw’s work, for instance, self-defined as a “political extravaganza”, aimed to expose “the unreality of both democracy and royalty as our idealists conceive them”, revealing instead the power of a plutocracy “which, having destroyed the royal power by frank force

under democratic pretexts, has bought and swallowed democracy” (Shaw, 2003): an intriguing if not prophetic perspective that –as it will be seen– also permeated and influenced the Chekhov-Rattigan pair. Indeed, in Hall’s work the juxtaposition of an early comedic Russian sketch and a melancholy mature drama acquired a political intent: one that revealed the tensions between the perpetuation of imperialistic social values and the growth of new intercultural communities at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, as seen through the equally contradictory directorial choices.

To fully understand this, and before delving more deeply in the Chekhov-Rattigan connection, it is important to consider first the origins of *Swansong*. It originally appeared at a very specific moment of Chekhov’s career, in 1887, when he was starting to explore the theatre as a professional prospect. This was not the Anton Chekhov of wise eyes and quiet demeanour; it was Antosha Chekhonte, the young writer and theatre critic, who published in different Moscow and St. Petersburg magazines while still finishing his medical studies. Behind him there were already some attempts at drama: the lengthy *Platonov* had been finished over a decade earlier, and short satiric sketches like *The Retired Captain* or *The Sudden Death of a Steed* had been published alongside his early short stories. However, there were still no overtly psychological creations in his dramatic opus: only at the end of that year he would write *Ivanov*, his first attempt at a full-length drama, using traditional rhetorical styles and a general melodramatic plot construction. *Swansong*, then, could be considered –with the contemporary first version of *The Evils of Tobacco*– as the most ‘mature’ expression of his early, richly satiric style: one where “objective understanding (...) is achieved through comedy and contrast (...), [and] sentiment is used just to expose the sentimental” (Gottlieb, 1982: 132).

The essential humanity of Svetlovidov, the protagonist, was not denied: the opening, with him waking up in the middle of the night and realizing that he has been left behind on an empty stage,

effectively presented his despair and announced the heart-breaking ending of *The Cherry Orchard*. However, at this point other elements openly mocked these emotional connections: Svetlovidov appears ridiculously dressed as Calchas, a “wily old character in Offenbach’s comic opera *La Belle Hélène* (...) [with] a long-haired wig, a comical chiton, and a garland” (Senelick, 1997: 307); his empathetic attitude was contrasted to his drunkenness and risible recitation of Shakespearean tragedies, mainly *King Lear* and *Hamlet*; and even his ‘name’ was no other than a stage name meaning ‘of bright aspect’, in an obvious ironic reference to his dark and depressing attitude. It comes as no surprise that Chekhov wrote the part for one of the comic stars of the Alexandrisky Theatre, Vladimir Davydov, who in his first performance on February 19, 1888, “put so many ad-libs about great actors of the past that Chekhov could barely recognise his text (Senelick, 1997: 305): the whole concoction was a light entertainment touched by some dramatic passages, useful as a platform for meta-theatrical jokes and generally centred on a condemnation of mediocrity and the necessity to come to terms with the most unchallenging aspects of life.

This, however, was not the approach taken by Hall: leaving aside the short play’s connection with the satiric Russian tradition of Gogol and Ostrovsky –the circus-like exaggeration, the visual conceptualization of theatre as a space of grotesqueries and critique of social types–, the production created a comic-tragic atmosphere, where characters could be seen from a more definite psychological perspective. This is understandable, first of all, when taking into account the theatrical environment in which Hall was immersed at the time: far away from the prevalent universe of melodrama and political unrest of 1887’s Russia, where a less cartoonish view of a drunk and disappointed actor could have produced an immediate response by the official censorship, 2009 Britain was a post-industrialized parliamentary democracy with a long tradition of realism that pervaded socially committed plays, dramas and popular musical entertainments, in works by important authors like Shaw, Rattigan, Osborne, Hare and Brenton among many others. The social

environment was different, having experienced a cultural clash where the incorporation of all possible perspectives seemed to be harder than ever: according to the 2011 National Census, 8% of the permanent residents of the island were by the end of the first decade of the 21st century non-British, coming mostly from countries such as India and Poland (Office for National Statistics, 2012). Also, as a (pre-Brexit) member of the European Union, and bombarded by the transformations brought by the appearance of the Internet and social media, the whole country had to accept its remarkable yet diminished position in a world dominated by the US, the multinationals and the raise of the Chinese economic plan. Hall's organisation of the yearly season could be read then as a personal response to those historical changes; and Chekhov's piece, with its selection of quotes by Shakespeare and its comic-tragic approach that highlighted the miseries of an old-school character, as a sardonic representation of Hall's position within the theatrical circles at the age of 83.

When it comes to the interpretation of the play, it should be understood too that the director was borrowing from very specific interpretations of the writer; interpretations that, as it was indicated in the historical contextualisation of this work, were created by Komisarjevsky in the 1920s and based on a nostalgic, idealised view of the Imperial past of the country. Indeed, this view had indirectly permeated previous approaches by Hall to the Russian writer's works: the most important being perhaps his 1978 version of *The Cherry Orchard*, premiered on 14 February of that year under the shadow of the stir produced by the Richard Eyre – Trevor Griffiths' production on the previous year. Casting Albert Finney in the role of Lopakhin and the young Ben Kingsley as Trofimov, Hall tried to recapture the commercial response and critical interest exerted by this previous production, recognised (as mentioned before) by its Marxist interpretation of the Chekhovian drama as a harbinger of the socio-political changes of the twentieth century, and by its vindication of the working-class characters over the aristocratic figures that had been until then the main interest of famous thespians. However, this desire to create an impact was contradicted by the chosen

aesthetic style: with period clothes and a conventional design, the director considered all characters “self-absorbed” and narcissistic, “almost indifferent to other people’s troubles” (quoted by Senelick, 1997: 313), creating a harsh and unsympathetic universe that seemingly opposed the more elegiac vision of ‘classical’ British performances, but that at the end still preserved their highly individualistic approach that denied any symbolism or social vindications. The translation by Michael Frayn, faithful but excessively elegant in the treatment of the dialogue, airbrushed the social gaps and differences suggested in the original version; unsurprisingly, due to the by then fifty-years-long tradition of a tamed British Chekhov, his work was well received by critics and audiences alike.⁵³

Conscious of the cultural resonance of a more nostalgic Chekhov, Hall’s 2009 production of *Swansong* fitted even more comfortably into the traditional interpretative mould of the author. The commission of a very faithful version by Scottish poet and scholar Stephen Mulrine highlighted this perspective: having already worked with the director in his 2008 *Uncle Vanya* production, which was the first show to ever grace the finished Rose Theatre in Kingston, the translator was already aware of the position given by Hall to the Russian playwright as an adopted heir of British values.⁵⁴ Also, the elegant sets designed by Christopher Woods exalted the realistic interpretation, solidly establishing the ‘fourth wall’ and creating a “shabby gentility” of pastel and beige tones (Spencer, 2009); period costumes firmly positioned the story in a 19th century pseudo-Victorian society; the

⁵³ Frayn-Chekhov’s connection was already suggested in the historical contextualisation through *Wild Honey*, the 1984 adaptation of the latter’s early play *Platonov*. Directed by Christopher Morahan, it premiered at the National Theatre during Peter Hall’s artistic tenure (1973-1988): as mentioned before, it was a literary respectful and dramatically fluid creation, which nevertheless distrusted “emotion as ludicrous or embarrassing” and “deprived Chekhov’s characters of their ambiguity” (Senelick, 1997: 319). Also, it eluded any mentions to the Falklands–UK War or Thatcher’s and Reagan’s political alliances; considering that the plot revolved around the political disappointment of a young and naïve idealist, it can only be wondered if such a powerful connection was not established on purpose. The goal, it seemed, was to entertain only, even if that meant to continue the tradition of interwar comedies and to ignore the theatrical and political transformations of the country in the intervening 50 years.

⁵⁴ The building itself was based on the Elizabethan venue that had premiered Shakespeare’s early plays: the choice of a Chekhovian play to open such a Shakespearean space could not be more revealing.

lighting effects by Peter Mumford emphasised the nocturnal, elegiac qualities of the story and created a self-containing universe of workmanlike precision; a controlled tempo added solemnity and an occasionally ponderous sense of drama; and –despite his comic formation and impeccable sense of timing– Peter Bowles’ performance was shaped to produce a bittersweet effect, a mixture of occasional laughter and tragic catharsis. The intent was obviously to recreate the classic ‘Chekhov feeling’, that very British sensation of emotional arrestment and emphasis on “character exploration rather than (...) the *ideas* of a play” (Gottlieb, 1993: 151); a desire to express, in no more than half an hour, the tapestry of pathetic emotions ‘inherent’ to the Russian author and his late polyvalent dramas.

This decision –which did not allow Bowles to improvise about contemporary events as Davidov had done in the 1888 premiere– changed however the balances of the one-act work. Originally not intended to be a “tear-jerker”, avoiding “sentiment (...) by the audience’s knowledge that Svetlovidov is drunk, and thus feeling ill, maudlin and full of self-pity” (Gottlieb, 1982: 131), and created to mock a melodramatic style of theatre that belonged to a generation of thespians trapped in a veneration of the past, the play was turned into the celebration of a pathetic figure who lamented the disappearance of a ‘golden’ era and whose melancholic musings should be embraced with bittersweet empathy. Hall’s choice to “plop an Agamemnon speech” in addition to the already present quotations of Shakespeare, Voltaire and Moliere (Coveney, 2009), not only connected the play to Rattigan’s creation –whose title refers to Robert Browning’s version of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*– but also suggested a link between the protagonist and the epic prowess of a Greek tragic hero. His actions became expressions of a daring yet flawed personality; his precise diction echoed the emotional power of tragic soliloquies; and his whole life experience seemed at certain moments to transcend its individual value and reflect on the general passage of time and society’s

abandonment of poetic, 'better' historical times.⁵⁵ Even *Swansong*, a title originally filled with ironic subtexts that underlined the contradiction between the old actor's inflated self-esteem and audiences' perception of his skills, acquired a literal signification, showing the melancholy twilight of the main character and the director's celebration of a particular style of interpretation that –in a world of physical theatre and other theatrical experiments– could only be described as traditional.

The decision to connect the show with Rattigan's play also enhanced this nostalgic undertone: not in vain a critic, when comparing both shows, considered that "Rattigan, in his contained emotion and tragi-comic tone, seemed far more Chekhovian than Chekhov himself" (Billington, 2009). As if realizing that the British author's work suited even more the impositions created for his Russian counterpart, Hall created a Chekhovian Rattigan for the second half of the evening: amplifying each other, both creations were connected not by their inherent stylistic similarities, but by the ideology of their director. Not that they are exclusively his own: as with Chekhov, Rattigan's work has been subjected to a very precise –and restrictive– reinterpretation, which ironically came with a surge of interest after a period of both public and critical neglect. Indeed, since the late 1950s, with the arrival of the kitchen sink drama movement, his plays were accused of lacking a true connection with the gritty social dramas of British society; taking his own description of the ideal theatregoer as an "Aunt Edna (...), a respectable, middle-class, middle-aged, maiden lady" (quoted by Innes, 2000: 77), the Angry Young Men highlighted what they considered as his anachronistic social values. This view, however, obscured the fact that his "themes are subtly subversive, his plots revolve around wildly relevant moral issues, and his characters have considerable depth" (Innes, 2000: 77);

⁵⁵ It can only be wondered if Hall would have tolerated a different approach to these authors, considering their canonical reputation. Would it have been acceptable for him, who defended "the Powell principles of verse-speaking" and "the integrity of the single line of Shakespearean verse as an organic poetic unit" (Rosenbaum, 2001), to mock that rhetorical style as the original play intended? Perhaps, as a figure of authority and a self-declared iambic-fundamentalist, his attack –even with a tongue firmly in cheek– of the most internationally known symbol of national identity could not have been easily justifiable.

departing from a desire to defy tradition and explore new territories, and a bigoted disdain for someone who was known for his homosexual tendencies (Rebellato, 1999: 87), the younger generation rejected an author who had captured the ritualistic conventions that disguised the intimate dissatisfaction and emotional repression of post-World War I British society.

Almost forty years later, this view started to change: after “the Almeida [Theatre]’s revelatory 1993 revival of *The Deep Blue Sea*” (Cavendish, 2011b), an increased curiosity for Rattigan’s work led to a more frequent staging of his plays, leading to a full blossoming just before and after the 100th anniversary of his birth in 2011. Staged plays included the National Theatre’s *After the Dance* (1939; revival’s date: 2010) and the Old Vic’s *Cause Célèbre* (1975; revival’s date: 2011); emphasising the tragicality of the stories, both adopted a serious, slow-moving rhythm that mixed expressions of containment and intimate bursts of emotion. This forged a positive impression of the author as a quintessential model of restraint, a rediscovered British response to the individualisms and melancholy *longueurs* usually applicable to Chekhov; his position in the theatrical panorama of the country was firmly re-established, to the point that *After the Dance* won “Best Revival (...), Best Costume Design, Best Actor in a Supporting Role for Adrian Scarborough and Best Actress for leading lady Nancy Carroll” at the 2011 Olivier Awards (Bishop, 2011). However, just as it happened in the case of the Russian author, this process of canonization came with a price: the airbrushing of the political undertones that Rattigan explored in his plays, revealing the crisis of a society that could not find itself in a world where the ideas of Empire and territorial control had lost their meaning. The critique against the hedonism and inactivity of the ‘British Young Things’ present in *After the Dance*, for example, was subtly undermined by the reinforcement of the individualistic traits of the characters; figures like the passive dilettante David Scott-Fowler, whose mask of carelessness could have represented the indifference of many towards the earth-shattering event that was about to transform the European continent (World War II), were presented as unique and eccentric,

alienated despite the period costumes from the bigger picture of their (or, for that matter, the spectator's) time. It was a highly sophisticated entertainment, which nevertheless watered down some of the edgiest social corners of Rattigan's dramaturgy.

Hall's productions of *The Browning Version* and *Swansong*, working on a smaller scale, showed similar traits. Svetlovidov and teacher Andrew Crocker-Harris, the main characters of Chekhov's and Rattigan's works, were treated at face-value and interpreted by Bowles with an identical degree of 'realism': he and the supporting actors were enclosed on the stage, separated from their physical and figured surroundings. The first work, far from its "surrealism and atmospheric theatricality", its vaudeville-esque origins that aimed for direct interaction with the public (Coveney, 2009), became a ponderous and closed work where two characters seem to be mostly interested in a personal exchange of miseries; in the second one, although the structure of the play certainly supported a more 'naturalistic' interpretation, the post-war world where the action takes place –as exemplified by the Crocker-Harris nickname "The Himmler of the lower fifth" (Rattigan, 1953: 30) and the general clash of old-fashioned and reformist forces– was underestimated, replaced by a claustrophobic study of the main character as a flawed yet tragically empathetic figure.⁵⁶ That does not mean, of course, that *all* political connotations were avoided: by focusing the personal approach on the pathetic side of two men[, each] at the end of his career, looking back on his past life and regretting the direction it has taken and what has been lost on the way" (Connor, 2009), the result was an indirect defence of traditional and monolithic notions of national identity. The 'timeless' feeling of both shows ultimately showed a lack of interest in controlling some of the most challenging social transformations of the UK at the turn of the first decade of the 21st century; in the

⁵⁶ As it happened in Chekhov's case, the production emphasised the relationship of Crocker-Harris with *Agamemnon*. Thanks to this connection, his personal drama was underlined, brushing aside all negative values –the strictness of his teaching, the deep bitterness he imposed around him– and reinforcing his ultimately tragic nature: a friend of the young, Orestes-like student Taplow, and a victim of his Clytemnestra-esque wife Millie.

production's general indifference for Rattigan's character of Mr. Gilbert (a bearer in the play of new educative and social theories), an opportunity was missed to symbolically connect him with progressive audiences or with that 7.7% of the non-British population that according to the 2011 Census (only two years later after the productions) lived in Bath & North East Somerset (Office for National Statistics, 2011b). The tragedy, Hall seemed to observe, consisted not in the fact that these two characters were behind their times, but that the times around them were too inaccessible and incomprehensible; audiences, beyond their own personal beliefs, were supposed to pity them and share their reverence for that past that perhaps should not have been left behind.

All contemporary or progressive discourses were tamed then in favour of an indirect celebration of "something more ancient and nebulous –the 'nation'– (...), an immemorial past" that comprised a glorified image of the 'beauties' of a more aristocratic, even imperial past (Brennan, 1993: 44): that time when Svetlovidov succeeded in his career as an interpreter of Agamemnon and King Lear, and Crocker-Harris wrote his first, carefree translation of Aeschylus' tragedy. Despite the playwrights' difference in age and artistic evolution at the time of composition of their plays –27-year-old Chekhov versus 37 year-old Rattigan, with 70 years of history between them–, Hall's aesthetical approach remained similar and conservative: one proposed by a revered theatrical impresario who had personally collaborated in the birth and direction of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre, the two undisputed guardians of the dramatic national identity. The efforts of supporting characters like Candida Gubbins, who played with "coolness and determination [that pierces] those around her" the role of Crocker-Harris's "manipulative wife" (Tavener, 2009), only underlined the focus on Bowles' impeccable and melancholy performances; the whole evening was structured to create a calculated emotional impact, that ultimately longed for the soothing –and perhaps lost– powers of tradition.

To recognise this nostalgic posture with more clarity, Hall's 2009 show can be compared to the original production of *The Browning Version*, which took place in 8 September 1948 at the Phoenix Theatre. There, the dramatic piece was followed by another Rattigan play, *Harlequinade*, a satirical farce centred on the misdemeanours of a group of actors staging *Romeo and Juliet*, which symbolised the challenges and promises faced by post-World War British theatre. This drama-comedy diptych –usual in Rattigan's work– was “designed to make audiences continually re-evaluate their attitudes”, and to generalize “the individual case, allowing the wider moral issues to emerge” (Innes, 2002: 82); the second work commented on the first, enhancing its final notes of a better future into a direct expression of the redeeming value of laughter and the healing power of art in a society tarnished by violence. Hall's organisation of the drama did not explore this possibility: by positioning first a farce that had already been filled with nostalgic elements, and then delving into an explicit drama that maintained its ambiguity to the end –Crocker-Harris' decision to pay a visit to his wife's lover being presented with more sarcasm than reconciliation–, the British director seemed to propose a darker interpretation. It implied, first, that the comedic side of *Swansong* –no matter how much it had been buried under 'serious' undertones– came secondary to the sadness of *The Browning Version*; the possibility of a better future was displaced in favour of the remembrance of a lost past. Second, the order supported an idea of aesthetic inheritance: following the idea of Rattigan as a national response to Chekhov, the staging suggested that the Russian master had been at least successfully recreated by his English counterpart. Although separated by generations, Hall intertheatrically suggested that the latter had kept alive the national politics of melancholia and memory usually connected to the former; also, in his reinforcing of specific pains over collective political concerns, he connected both authors to the individualist perspectives reinforced during the 1980s by the Thatcherite political project, and their preservation in 2009 as pillars of the concept of national identity.

This could be seen as a partly reactionary view, especially when considering Hall's recognition as an artist who during his career had directed works by communist writers like Howard Brenton and produced stagings by ground-breaking directors like Mike Nichols. There are, however, other aspects of his work that should also be considered: despite his undeniable working skills and advanced views when it came to theatre organisation and promotion, his career always remained within privileged and traditional circles. After his early retirement in 1968 from the Royal Shakespeare Company, for example, Hall dedicated his efforts to a freelance career mainly with the celebrated Glyndebourne Festival, a symbol of aristocratic values since its inception in 1934: a decision that, in the enduring economic successes that it produced, proved both his strong commercial instincts and a proverbial pragmatism where political and social postures were secondary to the entertainment value of his productions. "In many ways his biggest contribution has been as a producer", his intimate friend Richard Eyre recognised (quoted by O'Mahoney, 2005): in other words, an interest in the practical ebbs and flows of a company rather than the subtler political or aesthetic explorations of a determinate dramatic work. This might explain why in 1979, in the context of a "backstage strike by members of NATTKE (National Association of Theatrical, Television and Kine Employees)" (Billington, 2007: 254), he supported a strong and anti-unionist force, voting "Tory (...) for the first and only time" (O'Mahoney, 2005): under economic and structural duress, a hierarchical and controlling view was ultimately preferred. Not surprisingly, some persons attacked this approach: director Jonathan Miller called him a "safari-suited bureaucrat", while Michael Blakemore found him "obsessed with pedigree" (quoted by O'Mahoney, 2005).

Of course, we should not ignore the personal conflicts and rivalries that led to such extreme opinions. But it is undeniable that the patrician attitude taken by Hall back in the 1970s still remained in the 2009 season in Bath: after all, in the selection of the name of *Peter Hall Company*

as an umbrella for different directors and playwrights (who were not directly involved in the selection of the shows), there was an open desire to turn every presentation into parts of a recognised brand, controlled by a central leader who aimed for both critical and economic success. This is even more evident in the shows directed by Hall himself, possessors of a similar aesthetic approach: despite differences in historical period or dramatic style, the *mise-en-scène* for both *Swansong* and *The Browning Version* was more focused on an efficient transmission of ideas rather than in the creation of poetic flourishes or directorial interventions. In other words, there was an obedience to the original script –the written text– over other more physical ways of theatrical expression. “Peter Hall’s meticulous attention to detail ensured that every gesture, every pause, every movement augmented the dialogue”, noticed one critic (Connor, 2009): indeed, it was obvious for the spectators that the eloquent pronunciation of each syllable was a main concern, even over the movements of the actors on the stage or the creation of visually striking set-ups. This no doubt came from the director’s early studies in Cambridge, more specifically with “F.R. Leavis, who inculcated attentiveness to the text, to close reading; and George Rylands, who founded the influential Cambridge Marlowe Society” (Rosenbaum, 2001): thanks to them, Hall inherited a reverence for dialogue as the centre of drama and as an immutable force that carried traditions, references and identity values.⁵⁷

It is in traditions, after all, where what Malinowski calls “myth acts” are preserved; “a retrospective of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief”, strengthened “by tracing [them] back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events” (quoted by Brennan, 1993: 45): and both productions, despite their different origins and intentions, were ultimately fitted to carry and propagate these conservative discourses of national identity. Chekhov’s work was particularly

⁵⁷ This tradition was perhaps reinforced by the linguistic richness of Shakespeare and his central position both in traditional notions of cultural-political identity and in Hall’s overall theatrical career.

inadequate for it, due mainly to its aforementioned satirical and improvisational nature: by excessively respecting the original Russian text, to a point that a critic attacked the “well-worn phrases and overblown imagery” used by the translation (Tavener, 2009), the result contradicted the original aim of suggesting meanings through a surface of deliberately banal and antipoetic comments –that is, a textual surface that only served as a base for more revealing visual and unspoken significances. Hall applied instead a style where every word was uttered with poetic intonations; in the closing moments of the story, when Svetlovidov accepted that his best days were behind and quoted *Othello*’s farewell speech to the sycophantic theatre prompter Ivanitch, Bowles and his fellow cast member seemed to aspire to an epic grandiosity that echoed not only the traditional British interpretation of Chekhov’s later tragicomedies, but also the achievements of many generations of British tragic thespians. Convention was perpetuated, with an undercurrent defence of a presumed aesthetic ‘perfection’: both Chekhov and Rattigan were turned into vessels through which the nostalgia for a previous ‘grandiose’ time was transmitted.

The final results were far from mediocre: through his dramatic craftsmanship and artistic impetus, Hall offered a double bill that poetically vindicated traditional socio-cultural values within the world of British theatre. The praise offered by critics was appropriately aristocratic: Charles Spencer from *The Telegraph* compared Bowles’ face to a “tragic mask from ancient Greek drama” (Spencer, 2009), while Susannah Clapp from *The Observer* spoke of “a lifetime of emotion smothered under antimacassar and frilled lampshade” (Clapp, 2009). Only Michael Coveney (2009) criticised the show, commenting how to see “Peter Bowles play an old actor badly is only marginally less embarrassing than watching Peter Bowles play a decrepit classics master as a subdued suburban gangster in a double-breasted suit”. In general, however, there was a confirmation that –even in 2009– the Komisarjevsky-influenced interpretation of Chekhov as a melancholic playwright, a

laborious defender of the past, was still well received within the critical collective, even though the link was not openly acknowledged.

Taking into consideration Hall's whole conception of the season, it should also be said that there was a global attempt to introduce some political perspectives – the works by Shaw and Frayn showing the unquestionable challenges faced by democracy and the necessity of citizens' participation in political control. However, the chosen dramatic perspectives were somewhat narrow: in the selection of exclusively white male playwrights and directors, for example, there was not only a lack of recognition of female authors, but also a refusal to confront those cultures that by the end of the first decade of the 21st century were already part of the country's social skin, and whose dramatic traditions were not necessarily compatible with the structure of the traditional well-made play. So, even though the perspectives presented on the stage possessed a liberal edge, the staging of the double bill revealed a longing for the preservation of old-fashioned social trends. Once more, this was connected to Hall's past: even after the fall of the geographical Empire of the late 1940s and 1950s, exemplified in important historical events like the 1947 Indian Independence and the 1956 Suez Crisis, a mental Empire was preserved; hidden behind the mask of a "progressive wave of maturity and altruism" where the UK "maturely relinquished their imperial claim", there was a general refusal to acknowledge the end of that power (Rebellato, 1999: 86). The British director was a son of his times, growing up as a member of a society who "desired to concentrate on those issues which affected their personal lives" and ignored the occasionally brutal oppression suffered by the colonies during the same period (Cawood, 2004: 223-224): adding to this his inherited defence of Shakespeare and the text as bastions of cultural identity, it is understandable why he would eventually become a supporter of this more "benign imperial image [useful] to assuage the latent forces of anti-imperial opinion" (Roger Louis, 2006: 454).

As discussed in the previous section of this work, Chekhov's plays came to represent for conservative theatrical circles some very specific values: a nostalgic antidote to the inevitable transformations of the country and a tragic remembrance of presumably better times. In the selection of one of his earliest and more satiric works, there was for a second the risk of a dissonance, a different view than those perpetuated in some quarters since the 1920s: but in the tragic interpretation of the text, in the exaltation of Svetlovidov's despair, the result was a nostalgic view that blended well with Rattigan's Crocker-Harris, another pseudo-Chekhovian character who combined repression with a sense of failure –the tragic failure of those traditional voices he was supposed to represent. In a nutshell, then, this double bill encompassed the main trends of Peter Hall's theatrical career: the acceptance of calculated risks counterbalanced by popular, crowd-pleasing decisions (such as the selection of actor Peter Bowles). In its pragmatism and intelligence, the show partly recognised that by 2009 some of the values the British director had always defended were anachronistic, especially when considering the challenges posed by 21st century Britain: seemingly feeling some nostalgia for those styles that were being left behind, it offered them a swansong, a last glorious moment under the theatrical sun of Bath. Hall's next –and last– two productions there, *Henry IV* Parts 1 and 2, would be all about Shakespeare, the symbol of the old nation: a last confirmation of his yearning that, perhaps, was embraced with even more passion by critics due to his personal degree of consecration.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ These two dramas, parts of a tetralogy of history plays complemented by *Richard II* and *Henry V*, are –as Charles Spencer described it– “among much else, (...) touching stores of old age, in which the sickness and tortured anxiety of Henry IV is contrasted with the comic vitality but underlying melancholy of Falstaff, who in the course of the two dramas fights heroically against the dying of the light” (Spencer, 2011b). This recognition of the passage of time, added to the bittersweet acceptance of the transformations of society, was underlined by Hall through his decision of “dressing the plays in early Victorian costume” (Billington, 2011): by doing so, he emphasised not only a connection between Shakespeare and the construction of an imperial-colonial notion of national identity, but also how this last era nostalgically marked the symbolic end of an important period of British history and the beginning of inevitable social transformations.

3. Art and commerce: The Bridge Project's *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Winter's Tale* (23 May 2009 – 15 August 2009)

Despite its limitations, Peter Hall's Chekhovian work embodied a point of view that had (and still has) to be taken into careful consideration, due to the cultural richness and pluralism faced by the UK at a relevant period of historical transformations. It is revealing, too, to notice that around the same time –despite superficial renovations– younger artists still preserved equally traditional views: an idea exemplified in Sam Mendes' The Bridge Project, more specifically its first season's productions of Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* and Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*.

Born in Reading, Berkshire, in 1965, the son of a Jewish-English woman and a Trinidadian-Portuguese father –a background that theoretically could have made him more sensible to the complexities of intercultural exchange– Mendes grew up in Oxfordshire and like Hall studied in Cambridge, where he directed many student plays that were positively received by critics. His first important achievement came at the age of 25, when he directed Judi Dench in *The Cherry Orchard* –a highly symbolic decision that revealed the desire of the young director to be taken seriously, and whose excellent results led him to be appointed in 1990 as the artistic director of the Donmar Warehouse. There, Mendes received recognition as a master craftsman, presenting a series of “impressively stylish” productions that mixed an impeccable sense of timing, carefully selected casts and a profitable dose of scandal, all “within tight commercial parameters” (Billington, 2007: 346). Important among them were *Cabaret* and *The Blue Room*, which famously starred a naked Nicole Kidman in a play of psychological sensuality that probably prepared her for Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*. Naturally, these contacts with Hollywood stars also benefited the young director: backed by his reputation and Steven Spielberg's patronage, he directed *American Beauty*, which received 5 Academy Awards including one for Best Director in 1999. Turned into an international celebrity, he

left the Donmar and married *Titanic* actress Kate Winslet in 2002; by working in high-profile cinema projects like *Road to Perdition* and *Jarhead*, he managed to expand his reputation even further and build a production company based in New York. He did not give up theatre, though: after a 2006 interpretation of David Hare's *The Vertical Hour*, and while developing the films *Revolutionary Road* and *Away we Go*, he was eager to find a project that could allow him "to exploit the interpretive potential of artists with different backgrounds working together" (Green, 2008); this, added to a conversation with (at the time) Old Vic artistic director Kevin Spacey and BAM theatrical impresario Joseph V. Melillo, led to the creation of what would be known as *The Bridge Project*.

As its title implied, the idea was to connect "two particular theatrical communities, (...) based in a belief that a good actor is a good actor (...) [no] matter where they come from, or what accent they speak in" (Mendes quoted by Lunden, 2009). As a Briton living in the US—that is, a perfect mirror of his friend Spacey—Mendes was aware of the stereotypes: on one side "a British singing style exemplified by John Gielgud", all monarchic voices and cultivated speeches, and on the other "an American naturalism exemplified by Marlon Brando", with a quasi-religious fascination for Lee Strasberg's Method (Green, 2009). The idea of creating a troupe formed by an equal number of interpreters from both sides might have been seen then as an inspired one: the concept implied a renovation of the stage, a view of theatre as an intercultural arena where different backgrounds and techniques could complement—and not fight—each other. As the director himself commented, "I do not want London to feel it's getting something from America, or America to feel it's getting something from London. (...) I want to take those labels off entirely" (Green, 2009).⁵⁹ The objective could almost be seen as the ideal metaphor for the political hopes expressed by the arrival of Barack

⁵⁹ It is interesting how the director contrasted the theatrical style of a city to that one of a nation: a subtle, and perhaps unconscious, expression of a sense of superiority, where a single city of the native country competed with an entire foreign land.

Obama's government, more specifically regarding the "special relationship" where the US considered "Britain as her firmest European ally" (Cawood, 2004: 289)⁶⁰: indeed, as Obama himself remarked shortly before his election to a group of expatriates living in London, "we have a chance to recalibrate the relationship and for the UK to work with America as a full partner" (Borger, 2008).⁶¹ Therefore, by presenting the show not only in New York and London but also in theatres in Singapore, New Zealand, Spain, Germany and a pre-economic crisis Greece –all of them co-producers of the show⁶²–, *The Bridge Project* could be seen as a benign cultural exhibition that showed a more constructive side of a dual front that during the first decade of the century had led the 'War on Terror' in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq.

Behind this idealism there was, of course, a pragmatic desire of making money by creating a work that could satisfy both US and British audiences. After all, back in 2002 Mendes premiered, as part of his Donmar Warehouse farewell season, a Shakespeare-Chekhov double bill of *Twelfth Night* and *Uncle Vanya* that was equally successful in its original West End run and a 2003 transfer to BAM coordinated by Melillo. After that, the producer "'affectionately stalked' the director in hopes of enticing him to return" with a similar project (Green, 2008); Spacey, "looking for a way to do what he called epic work" (Green, 2008) and perhaps in hopes of reinforcing his US presence after the time dedicated to the Old Vic, agreed to support the endeavour on the condition that he participated as an actor in its third and last season (he eventually played Richard III in 2011). In a

⁶⁰ This despite the previous good relationship between the then recently finished Prime Ministry of Tony Blair and George W. Bush's presidency.

⁶¹ As one of his advisors commented, the implication in these comments was that "it's no longer going to be that we are in the lead and everyone follows us. Full partners not only listen to each other, they also occasionally follow each other" (Borger, 2008).

⁶² Indeed, the "Athens & Epidauros Festival, The Edge® Auckland (NZ), Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen, The Singapore Repertory Theatre [and] Teatro Español de Madrid" economically supported the creation of the season (BAM, 2009). However, none of them had any influence in the casting, direction or selection of the shows, so both productions should be considered as US-British creations that –in an almost neo-colonialist gesture– toured to show the theatrical achievements of these two cultural centres.

few words, this was a promissory project for everyone involved, which inverted the more common trend of transferring shows from London to the US: as Andrew Edgecliffe-Johnson reflected, “far more travels from the UK to the US as London has a huge cost advantage over Broadway (...) [due to] higher theatre rents, bigger marketing budgets and tougher demands from unions” (Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2011). However, in its selection of a British director, a British translator (Tom Stoppard) and a group of British actors who got “most of the plum parts” (Spencer, 2009), the artistic centre of the show remained firmly in hands of UK’s citizens: an interesting mixture of sensibilities that – as it will be seen – influenced the interpretations and intentions of both plays.

Mendes selected Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* and Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* after a previous decision to produce *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* fell apart due to “a family emergency” of their projected main actor Stephen Dillane (Green, 2009). The decision to introduce a Chekhov play as a replacement could be read, first of all, as a recognition of the shared universality of both authors: after all, they had become by 2009 established names of the international repertoire, and their public recognition made them an attractive and safe bet from an economic perspective.⁶³ Beyond this, however, the fact that *The Cherry Orchard* was selected to replace a Shakespeare play partly indicated the Russian author’s dissemination and recognition within the British theatrical environment: despite his ‘foreign’ origin, his work was positioned next to the most iconic symbol of British theatre, and deemed worthy to open a transatlantic project directed (and played) by Anglo-Saxon creators. This is even more revealing when considering that the following two seasons of *The Bridge Project* only included Shakespearean dramas: *The Tempest* and *As You Like It* in 2010, and

⁶³ New Yorkers should have felt a closer connection to the material, due the fact that the first US presentations of Shakespeare and Chekhov took place in the city: the former in an “amateur production of *Romeo and Juliet* (...) on 23 March 1730” (Morrison, 2002: 231), the latter in the professional productions of *The Bear* and *The Seagull* by the Washington Square Players at the Bandbox Theatre in 1915 and 1916 (Senelick, 2007: 154).

Richard III in 2012. Whether by chance or choice, then, Chekhov's position as a symbol of British cultural identity ended up being reinforced once more.

Also, the final selection had an unacknowledged yet relevant historical value: *The Cherry Orchard* was the first full-length Chekhov play staged in London back in 1911 (Senelick, 1997: 132) and the first drama by the Russian author translated to English in the US by Max Mandell in 1908 (Senelick, 2007: 154). Meanwhile, *The Winter's Tale* was successfully presented many times in New York since the 1851 and 1856 productions by William Burton, "the first American stagings of the play to use a mostly unadulterated version of the Folio text" (Ortiz, 2009), and more recently and relevantly by "David Jones' BAM Theatre Company" in 1980, in a production starring Brian Murray as Leontes (Hischak, 2001: 163). Perhaps Mendes and his troupe were unaware of these connections, but they certainly realized that both shows suited the necessity of capturing the complex links between the two countries: one showing an epic if contained social fresco where different voices and perspectives could be heard, the other taking place in two different countries and mixing dramatic and comic effects. The intention, at least on paper, was to create a literary base that could highlight the qualities of the cast and the political undertones of the whole endeavour.

On a more personal level, the productions echoed two moments of Mendes' previous theatrical career: the aforementioned 1989 performance of *The Cherry Orchard* with Judi Dench, and his 2002 *Uncle Vanya* and *Twelfth Night*. In both cases, beyond the artistic purpose, there was an attempt to prove a directorial skill through canonical works by two authors the director clearly felt comfortable with; by recognising Chekhov's and Shakespeare's relevance in the British and American stages, and projecting it into the 2009 stagings, Mendes seemed to state the seriousness and ambition of his efforts. At the same time, however, it can also be recognised a desire to 'play it safe', where the ambition was related more to the physical qualities of the productions rather than to the exploration

of new dramatic interpretations. The selection of the cast could be read as an expression of this trend: a mixture of talented thespians from the US, Canada and the UK, that combined famous stage actors (Simon Russell Beale), movie stars (Ethan Hawke) and emerging young talents (Rebecca Hall) in a way that the level of recognition and the desire to appeal to different demographics seemed to be at least as important as the appropriateness of each one of them for their multiple roles. Russell Beale's case is perhaps the most representative: having been the highlight of the 2002 productions, his participation in *The Bridge Project* marked the continuation of a collaboration that represented—at least for British audiences—a celebration of dramatic grandeur, a certificate of talent and quality, and an assured economic result. Due to the importance of his roles, playing Leontes in Shakespeare's play and Lopakhin in Chekhov's, his was also a relevant position because it revealed how, at the core of the stagings, and despite the already presented idea of exchange and balance, there was still a defence of a classical acting tradition and a more 'theatrical' style connected to Britain.⁶⁴

The text used for Chekhov's production also reflected this tension. More an adaptation than a faithful translation, it was created by Helen Rappaport and Tom Stoppard, the first a historian specialised in revolutionary Russia, the second a veteran playwright who in 2002 premiered *The Coast of Utopia*, a recounting of the same country's situation between 1833 and 1866, that is, the world remembered by all the characters of *The Cherry Orchard*. Ranevskaya and Gayev's memories of their happy childhood, Firs' melancholia when mentioning the forgotten cherry jam recipe: all these feelings and events could have been, and to an extent were, adequately contextualised thanks to the comprehension of the political contradictions of the second half of 19th century Russia,

⁶⁴ This preference was intensified by the already mentioned fact that all the lead roles were given to British actors: with Ethan Hawke's exception, none of the US members of the cast—relegated to supporting parts—received the same degree of press or critical recognition.

presented and analysed by the British dramatist in his own earlier works. His vast knowledge of the English language and intellectualism also gave to the final work a “conversational ease and erudite humour” (Rooney, 2009), giving “full reign to the elaborate strangeness, the ornate isolation of [the] characters” (Clapp, 2009b), while adding “a veneer of modernity, for example using first names rather than last or patronymics” (Fisher, P., 2009). This ‘Westernized’ the play and made it more accessible for American and British spectators; at the same time, it transformed its emotional roots into cerebral constructions, toning down “some of the conflicts between the characters by smoothing away some of the verbal aggression that’s in the original Russian” (Morrison, 2009).

This assimilation was also seen in the addition of “wisecracks, a bit of tomfoolery, a nifty somersault, and even waggish riffs on Shakespeare” (Miller, 2009): this no doubt was intended to preserve some of the original humour, and should be recognised for its attempt to leave behind some of the melancholy and restraint that characterised translations like those by Constance Garnett, whose version of *The Three Sisters* was the base of Komisarjevsky’s 1926 seminal production (Miles & Young, 1993: 240). The results, however, also diminished the ambivalent humanism of the original, in favour of an intellectual rhetorical stylisation: in addition to *Hamlet*’s quotations as puns, for example, there seemed to exist a desire to ‘outwit’ the Russian author, to remove his deliberately ‘banal’ episodes in exchange of more refined, fizzy approaches. An exchange, when Russell Beale said ‘Get thee to the scullery’ to a befuddled Vanya, was very representative: meant as a joke that highlighted the thespian’s Shakespearean skills, it nevertheless transformed the original character, not only adding a dominating attitude to his unfulfilled love relationship with Ranevsakya’s daughter, but also a sophistication that was at odds with his self-recognised literary ignorance. Yet again, there appeared to be a desire to turn the character into a more elevated British character: supported by Beale’s recognition as an actor, it became something more sophisticated, a nostalgic

and idealised portrayal of a cultivated bourgeois who was aware of Shakespeare and his aesthetic-political importance.

Mendes, of course, could have changed this by making some judicious cuts or by transforming the way the characters were played: however, taking into consideration his close collaboration with Stoppard throughout the staging process, that simply was not the case, as he respected (and most likely gave feedback to) the subtle transformations of the writer, enhancing them with some directorial techniques.⁶⁵ An early example can be found during the rehearsal period, which went on for two months (Lunden, 2009): despite dealing with a text that expressed social contradictions, Mendes practiced all the scenes with the actors forming a small closed circle, facing each other “with carpets in the middle, as a playing space”. “I think that actors act differently when they do not know where the camera-slash-audience is”, he said, “I think they [should] look only at each other” (Lunden, 2009). The mention of the carpets could be read as a reference to Peter Brook, who also premiered a *Cherry Orchard* at the BAM in 1988; but, rather than to indicate a similarity between the two directors, it only highlighted the cerebral and detached approach of the 2009 show, paying homage to previous incarnations of the drama for academic and economic rather than aesthetic reasons. Indeed, far from the intercultural and ritualistic attempts of the creator of the 9 hours long stage version of the *Mahabharata*, the whole cast rejected the universe beyond the spotlights; as Hall was doing at the same time by brushing aside the satiric-social possibilities of *Swansong*, Mendes created a social fantasy that put every action, every act of rage or despair, within a bubble of sanitised pathos. All potentially corrosive elements were controlled; fitting comfortably within the boundaries offered by the most traditionalist views on Chekhov, the actors were asked not to confront the ‘real’ world of socio-cultural contradictions, and to live in a controlled environment of

⁶⁵ Stoppard himself pointed out the “always interesting but never crazy” style of Mendes direction; one characterised “by a quickness and a clarity and a peerless respect for words” (Wood, 2008).

self-celebration and remembrance, expanded by media articles that acclaimed the complexity of the whole endeavour. Considering that the main sponsor of the productions was the Bank of America, it can be wondered if a slightly more politicized view of the Russian author could have been convenient or even possible. Whatever the reason, this approach was not attempted by Mendes.

The final staging, then, possessed a similar political restraint. The sets were simple and functional, designed to sustain the touring of the show: simple wooden walls framed the scene, and the orchard was suggested through lighting effects.⁶⁶ Continuing Brook's homage started during rehearsals, "Mendes and designer Anthony Ward summon[ed] the doomed privilege of Chekhov's fading Russian aristocrats by draping the (...) stage platform in a patchwork of dark Persian carpets" (Rooney, 2009); props were kept to a minimum, with only essential objects dispersed around the stage, and a group of chairs positioned to evoke a sense of space and symbolize the wealth of the aristocratic characters. Nothing was ineffective; the scenes flowed smoothly and there was a gripping intensity in individual scenes, such as in Varya's recollection of her childhood or Charlotta's accomplished comedic interludes. Simultaneously, a deliberate simplification of social and dramatic subtleties was evident: as John Morrison reflected in an informative example, "when the vain valet Yasha helps himself to the champagne put out for the guests in Act Four, it should be a transgressive and taboo-breaking moment, but the impact is completely lost because (...) [he] has been helping himself to wine and coffee throughout the play" (Morrison, 2009). The implications of this and other similar distortions were directly connected to the politics of nostalgia: a rewriting of the past that tried to erase the existence of serious inequalities in those earlier societies, in order to reinforce the myth of an idealised world of stability where all social classes were equally respected and

⁶⁶ The second act, which takes place outdoors in the family estate, was implied only through a change of the light's brightness: although this was mostly a pragmatic monetary decision, it also alienated the characters into their own private world, negating the wider social context suggested by the text.

prosperous. At the end, this only weakened the plights of the dispossessed and enhanced the tragicality of the aristocrats: those who were right and, due to an anonymous force, forced to move towards an uncertain future.

A similar trend existed in other elements of the staging: the lighting and the costumes. Academicism prevailed: in the tradition of Komisarjevsky, “the mellow golden glow” of Paul Pyant's illumination seemed “from the beginning to be about to fade” (Clapp, 2009b), while “Catherine Zuber’s deluxe period costumes” (Brantley, 2009) increased the general aloofness between the characters and any sense of social commentary. Occasionally there were moments of expressionistic intensity, when specific theatrical techniques were used to focus the attention on one or various central characters: Anya, Arkadina and Gayev’s first evocation of the garden was expressed through window-like pools of light, while the grand-dame’s unrest was exalted in the third act with a glamorous red dress that contrasted with the elongated shadows of the dancing guests. Also, two episodes used these elements for dramatic effect: first, during the mysterious scene of the passer-by, “a vaguely menacing line of proletarian figures (...) [appeared] in silhouette upstage against the back wall” (Morrison, 2009); second, throughout the dance scene Arkadina stood “under a red spotlight while (...) dancers circled her menacingly” (Miller, 2009). Some critics considered them reinforcements of the prophetic qualities of the play, while others found them unnecessary operatic flourishes that highlighted already obvious subtexts. What they seemed to miss –or at least to take for granted– was the fact that by adding an atmosphere of menace and fear to this change, the director immediately sided with the aristocratic world. The fragile balance suggested by Chekhov in the text was broken; Arkadina and her brother became pitiable characters, protagonists of a horror story who had been unjustly forced to leave a world of order and purity by a menacing, incomprehensible force. Ahead of them, Mendes seemed to say, there was only darkness: the same tragic image

implied by some political forces that feared, both in the US and the UK, the destruction of a 'traditional' notion of nation due to terrorism, 'unrestricted' immigration or cultural intermingling.

Music also exalted a tone of melancholic loss: created by Mark Bennett, in the initial US staging it was an orchestral score that was described as "uneven, sometimes evocative, often jangling" and unequivocally cinematic (Boyle, 2009); for the British run the same composition was re-orchestrated and turned into a more subdued –although equally nostalgic– piece for aluminium harp. Performances, no doubt due to Mendes' directorial decision, went to extremes of pathos and despair: characters like Charlotta and Varya, originally with fewer dialogues but precise psychological trends, were turned into pathetic figures that commented on the main story, the painful fight between the aristocrats and the growing landowner. This last figure, in fact, became the centre of the play: Russell Beale's committed performance transformed Lopakhin into an attractive figure, although possessor of a cerebral quality that occasionally suggested an unnatural, quasi-meta-theatrical celebration of classical acting values. When he systematically kicked over all the chairs on the stage at the end of the third act, the effect was visually effective but "out of character and artificial" (Morrison, 2009), as if the emotional release of his character had to be taken to the edge and acquire a superior, almost monarchic quality: the spectators were not exposed to the rage of a merchant, son of peasants, but to one of a king, a king full of guilt and self-hatred. In other words, the same king Leontes that delighted some of them in the parallel production of *The Winter's Tale*.

The Shakespearean connection, in fact, should not be underestimated. During rehearsals, the shows were practiced consecutively, doing "one week on the Chekhov, then one week on the Shakespeare" (Lunden, 2009), in a move that clearly established stronger connections between the stories: as Russell Beale commented, the "two plays infect each other (...); [they] are so much about children

and loss and time, and growing old and having regrets (...) [that] they do feed each other” (Lunden, 2009).⁶⁷ Also, once finished both creations were presented –in New York and London– in different occasions on the same day, creating a seven hours long theatrical experience that morphed the actors’ performances: Rebecca Hall reflected on this when saying that “when I play unsexy Varya in ‘Cherry Orchard’ (...) I can really play her completely, knowing that I get to play glamorous Hermione in ‘Winter’s Tale’ the next night. I do not have to worry about people thinking I’m always an awful frump” (Green, 2009). This is an interesting viewpoint not only because it revealed the simplification with which some Chekhovian characters were treated –mostly as depressing figures in contrast to the epic Shakespearean characters–, but also because it showed a very British approach in two productions that were alleged bastions of internationalism. Indeed, despite working with US actors, Mendes did not direct during this or any other *Bridge Project* seasons an Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller play; he chose instead the most recognised author of English literature and a Russian author which had come to embody (through a distinctly nostalgic reading) a traditional understanding of Britishness. Of course, it was not a crass exhibition of ‘national’ values, with flag-waving scenes or propagandistic political speeches: in the Bohemian scenes of *The Winter’s Tale*, for example, there was even a (clichéd) celebration of rural America through the introduction of “hoedowning, violin-scraping, guitar-wielding countryfolk rapturously celebrating the return of another fruitful year” (Quamrby, 2009).⁶⁸ However, in its subtle deference for the aristocratic characters on the Shakespeare and the Chekhov, in the celebration of their individuality over a collective political commitment, and in the emphasis given to their desire to return to a ‘glorious’ time, it was still very clear that the whole staging was controlled by someone who had grown in the

⁶⁷ This declaration summarises the nostalgic approach of the whole endeavour: one that aimed for a tone of regret and loss.

⁶⁸ *The Guardian’s* critic also recognised this artistic decision, pointing out that “Bohemia is a land of hideous opportunity: all red, white and blue and whooping, and lewd balloon dances (round ones for breasts and long ones for willies)” (Billington, 2009b).

UK during Thatcher's prime ministry: as part of a new "freelance culture" where what mattered was "the success of the individual project" (Billington, 2007: 348), Mendes imposed a social view that mixed a desire for capitalist economic success and a thirst for deeply-rooted traditions.

Other elements reinforced this view. It was already indicated how the costumes of *The Cherry Orchard* followed a quasi-Victorian style, positioning the plot in this very specific historical period; added to this, *The Winter's Tale* was transplanted to both "an Edwardian period" (Clapp, 2009b), as seen through the fashion style used by the characters of the kingdom of Sicily, and "a pastoral hoedown suggestive of Oklahoma" (Billington, 2009b), exemplified through the Bohemian characters. This certainly integrated the cast, marked with more clarity the line between tragedy and farce already present in Shakespeare's original, and gave actor Ethan Hawke an opportunity to explore with great success his comic skills. Also, it created a political connotation: in this fictional word, the US was still a rural universe, underdeveloped in social structure and political relevance, that in its naiveté had the secret to help foreigners and to rectify the wrongdoings of darker lands like the UK – Sicily. It was a view that in its political correctness tried to satisfy both parties but that at the end revealed how the director –as part and representative of more traditional perspectives– wanted to understand the socio-political reality of both societies: returning to the historical idea of the 'special relationship', but twisting in such a way that the illusion of monarchical superiority could be preserved, Mendes celebrated the importance of the discourses of the 'other country', while at the same time subtly undermining it as a comic land full of balloons and superficial flirtations. It seemed as if the discourse coming from the ancient Empire still yearned to treat its political successor with the self-serving and slightly patronizing attitude of the colonial period, which embraced physical resources, individual talents or different ideological postures only if it was profitable: a view that in the context of the challenged but still unparalleled economic control of the US and its imposition of international policies could only be considered as a nostalgic illusion. One

that, it must be said, ignored the way the UK actually followed political and economic decisions supported by its former colony (War on Terror, free-market capitalism), all in the hope of maintaining some international relevance.

The desire to return to the past was therefore very profound. It is interesting to notice that, in the Wednesday and Saturday performances when the two shows were presented together, *The Cherry Orchard* preceded its Shakespearean counterpart: whether it was a desire to celebrate the most 'national' author last, the wish for a comedic relief after the 'sadness' of the Chekhovian interpretation, or even a practical decision connected to labour regulations, the resulting order visually suggested a reinforcement of the message proposed in other elements of the staging. By the end of *The Cherry Orchard*, the fall of the aristocracy seemed inevitable; by contrast, due to the organisations of these fictions, at the beginning of *The Winter's Tale* a magic return was made to a time of kings, queens, kingdoms and monarchical structures. The entire cast properly embodied this transformation: Anya, who defended the necessity of a social change, was turned into a strong-willed and controlling queen; Trofimov, with his comically excessive yet well-intentioned ideas of social change, became an illiterate peasant; and Firs, old Firs who had collapsed in "a child's chair and the hard floor" (Simon, 2009), was suddenly transformed into an all-superior and dominating father Time. But perhaps the most important change was the already mentioned case of Lopakhin – Beale, turned into king Leontes: almost as a retribution for his actions against the 'innocent' aristocrats of *The Cherry Orchard*, he became a personification of irrational jealousy, an antagonist who threatened to destroy his court with evil suspicions and unfounded accusations. By the end of the play, however, with his rage controlled and wife 'miraculously' revived, the return to the *status quo* of things was celebrated: in his own way, Mendes suggested to the spectators that –at least in the world of fantasy– the world they were nostalgic about was still reachable. The last gesture of the queen with her husband –by refusing to touch him after her resurrection– should not be read

as a relativization of these values: it was the individual punishment that Leontes deserved for introducing chaos into a carefully balanced system. The social order, however, was once more in place and all characters respected it.

Chekhov joined forces with Shakespeare to build a common discourse, defending a conservative view of British national identity. Instead of establishing an intercultural dialogue, the director imposed his “own particular brand and style” (Billington, 2007: 348) to the whole staging; perhaps influenced by the economic commitments acquired with the co-producers of the show all over Europe, he did not take risks or explore controversial interpretations, preferring instead deep-rooted views very much dependant on traditional postures of his own culture and theatrical formation. The result was a technically accomplished but thematically unchallenging diptych; simplifying the political undertones of the plays, the directorial approach highlighted a more limited perspective. An interesting anecdote supports this: in Mendes’ office in New York, *The Observer* revealed, “antique metal letters, culled from an abandoned theatre, have been placed along one wall to spell 'Art' and 'Commerce', the words interlocking, as if their meanings were made to fit” (Wood, 2009). It’s a perfect visual metaphor not only of the director’s business-like mentality, but also of a commercial approach to theatre that, hidden by a mask of grand statements about the state of the nation, shared many things with more light-fared entertainment like the musical *Jersey Boys*, transferred in 2008 from Broadway to the West End (an exception to the most common opposite direction). By industrializing two aesthetic products and producing them with careful craftsmanship in order to get mass market success, the result was not –despite Mendes comment that “there's a lot to be learned and shared between the two theatrical cultures” (Lunden, 2009)– a reflection on the complexities of the Anglo-American relationship, but rather a pleasing patina of good intentions and an undercurrent of imperial nostalgia, a desire to culturally re-colonize through the stage lost political and geographical territories. “Overall more bridges were built than burnt”,

commented Theo Bosanquet and Laura Garring in a review round-up (2009): bridges that exalted the commercial interests of both societies, and underlined the wistful desires of the UK while leaving aside a more complex barter of social and cultural concerns.

4. Conclusion

As the analysis of the previous productions indicated, at the end of the first decade of the 21st century a conservative way of understanding British national identity still existed, based on the nostalgic celebration of a 'better' past and its presumably more stable and monolithic notions of identity. Within the local theatrical universe, where national and foreign writers mixed in a variety of productions, some artists from different generations maintained an established discourse that limited the understanding of the transformations experienced by the country during the previous fifty years. This was not necessarily due to a perverse common agenda, ready to block new interpretations coming out from other directors and actors; in Mendes and Hall's case, their theatrical perspectives were influenced by inherited social views. As indicated above, while the older director grew up in a society that saw the collapse of the imperial project, the director of *American Beauty* came from the era of "post-Thatcherite theatre, heavily beholden to its sponsors and rarely concerned either with the shock of the new or the European tradition" (Billington, 2007: 347). Together, they revealed how in these two age groups some quarters preserved a view of the nation where immigration concerns, economic instabilities or aesthetic complexities were secondary to a partly pragmatic, partly nostalgic preservation of a limited remembrance of the past, which (in the cases presented above) was defended with theatrical craftsmanship and fluid commercial conventions. Hall used a more straightforward approach, highlighting the text as a basic structural device and offering a limpid and subdued production, while Mendes borrowed from his

experience as a film director to create strong visual effects that occasionally veered into calculated melodrama. Both respected the actors, giving them space to develop their characters and allowing a good display of different performative styles: however, all were constrained by a viewpoint where a bittersweet feeling was the dominant emotion.

Despite different aesthetic preferences, then, it is evident that both productions continued Komisarjevsky's tradition of Chekhov as an heir to traditional and monarchic values. When connected to Shakespeare and Rattigan, his plays did not offer a critical angle that could enrich their discourses or suggest an intercultural exchange, but instead kept an assimilated and monolithic reading: in their Britishification, both *Swansong* and *The Cherry Orchard* became expressions of frustrated desires and revived phantasmagorias, where the future of the nation lay more in a return to the past than an acceptance of contemporary and future changes. Using the short intensity of the one act drama Hall highlighted the bleakness of two characters who were forced to face a future where their values had lost all meaning; while "at the start of each [Mendes] play the words 'O call back yesterday, bid time return' [were] projected onto the set" (Hitchings, 2009b), using a *Richard II* quotation to prepare spectators for the full-length dramas' interest on the seductive power of the past.

In order to arrive at other possible interpretative approaches, it is necessary to broaden the scope of the analysis and explore less traditional perspectives. The following chapter will focus on the possibilities offered by international productions and their influence in the British notion(s) of national identity.

Chapter Two: foreign Chekhovian productions and their influence in the understanding of British national identity

1. Introduction

As an assimilated artist who represented for a long time the nostalgia for a presumed imperial past of stability, it is understandable that Chekhov –as the previous chapter of this work indicated– served during the historical period analysed in this work (and even now) as a vessel to express conservative notions of British national identity. However, as the second half of the historical contextualisation already emphasised, from the early 1960s onwards some international productions presented in the country revealed that the Russian author’s plays had other possible interpretations, through which it was possible to discover fresh dramatic perspectives and previously disregarded ideological and political views. This led not only to a constant critical reappraisal of the author, but also to a renewed understanding of local socio-economic transformations, where the notion of belongingness and ‘otherness’ were relativized: following Homi Bhabha, these shows revealed how “the ‘other’ is never outside or beyond us” (1990: 4) but rather around, sometimes hidden or underestimated but always present. As the following pages will demonstrate, this trend continued at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, partly thanks to a constant flow of foreign productions presented in different contexts and venues all over the country.

To continue with the general exploration of British national identity, this chapter will explore a Russian production of *The Cherry Orchard*, presented by the Sovremennik Theatre in London in 2011, and an Argentinian version of *Uncle Vanya*, staged by the Daniel Veronese Company as part

of the 2010 Brighton Festival, which highlighted important local topics such as the influence of Russian émigrés, the complexities of theatrical economics, the politics behind theatre and arts festivals, and the socio-political tensions between the UK and the Argentinian government. Despite their different geographical origins and internal creative differences, and notwithstanding their brief presence in the country's stages, these two productions confronted and revealed the contradictions behind monolithic definitions of Britishness, thus providing local creators with new tools to articulate more complex and fluid versions of it.

The presence of international forces within the UK is not a recent event: despite the higher number of foreigner's arrivals at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, reaching "a net migration of non-British citizens (...) [of] 238,000 in the year ending December 2012" (Office of National Statistics, 2013), their influence was already essential years before in the development and improvement of the British stage. The historical contextualisation of this work already presented some foreigners connected to the local interpretation of Chekhovian dramaturgy: Princess Bariatinska and Theodor Komisarjevsky, who arrived in London in 1909 and 1922 and helped to shape the so called 'national' interpretation of the Russian playwright; Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and I.M. Rayevsky, whose work (among that of other Russian directors) was presented as part of the MAT's seasons in the UK between 1958 and 1970, offering "the opportunity of a fresh look to Chekhov's own cultural context" and leading "to a reassessment of the British style of playing Chekhov" (Marsh, 1993: 113); and Otomar Krejca, whose Artaudian take on *Three Sisters*, described as the "chaos of a zoo with wild animals attacking each other" (Senelick, 1997: 243), inspired national artists to offer a less romanticised view of Chekhov's canonical works. Added to this, other foreign playwrights and companies influenced important local transformations: for example, due to

its lasting impact in the strengthening of political theatre, it should also be considered Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble visit to London in 1956, which had a lasting impact in the strengthening of local political theatre, startling audiences with its "scenic, musical, and gestural elements", including "'commonness' in acting, (...) fluidity in set design (...) and a directorial emphasis on physical staging that reflected social relationships" (Borreca, 1995: 189-190).

In many ways, all these milestones added the necessary energy and renovation to a national stage that was already looking to express the historical transformations of the post-colonial era, at a time when "London's West End was dominated by a capitalist consortium known as the Group" which imposed a hegemonic style characterised by "exquisite sumptuous costumes, highly elaborate (...) sets [and] tightly controlled productions" (Kershaw, 2004: 296). George Devine's revolution and support to the playwrights grouped under the label of the Angry Young Men wouldn't have been as powerful without the political commitment and honesty offered to British audiences by Nemirovich-Danchenko's production or the alienation effects portrayed by the troupe of the then recently deceased writer of *Mother Courage*: it's revealing, after all, that the year of presentation of the last show coincided with the Suez Crisis and the premiere of *Look Back in Anger*. In a moment of crisis of previously established pillars of national identity, foreign theatrical forces –where Chekhovian productions played a fundamental role– proposed a series of aesthetic approaches and techniques that helped to understand a blossoming polyvalent society.

Despite the appearance of legislation like the Commonwealth Immigrants Act passed on 1 July 1962 (Winder, 285), which severely diminished the number of migrants during the next three decades, the local interest for international productions ironically increased during the following years. Focusing on urban centres like London and Edinburgh, but also influencing regional cities like Manchester and Brighton, audiences were exposed to a diversity of aesthetic styles from around

the world, which influenced the “staged, culturally produced, dynamic, and (...) inherently troubled” status of national discourses (Harvie, 2005: 3). This was not an easy dialogue: as indicated in the following pages, the productions’ reception depended on the geographical location of their presentation, the politics of the receiving companies who lent their stages, market strategies, and the agendas of the producers who brought them to the country. However, they also undeniably oxygenated the British stage with fresh perspectives: during the 2012 Olympics, for example, projects like *Globe to Globe* and the World Shakespeare Festival (organized by the Shakespeare’s Globe and the Royal Shakespeare Company) showed the interest of established venues to intermingle their well-established socio-cultural icon of national identity (Shakespeare) with his “present and distant, intimate and freshly unknowable” reinterpretations in a myriad of foreign theatrical spheres (Dickson, 2012).⁶⁹ Also, these events indicated how international discourses could help national audiences to discover valid new readings of their own cultural artefacts, revealing the transformations of their own notions of identity.

The truth behind the economic and critical success of these proposals (*Globe to Globe*, for example, continued in 2013 with 4 equally lucrative productions) lay too in the increasingly porous division between ‘foreign’ and ‘national’ theatregoers –an indication of the accelerated cultural transformations of the country. For many years, audiences were concentrated in the main urban centres and had a “similar financial status, education and occupation” (Bennett, 1997: 88): using available data from Canada, New Zealand and Britain, C. D. Throsby and G. A. Withers indicated in the 1979 book *The Economics of Performing Arts* how “the proportion of the population exposed to performance was substantially higher for middle-aged, high income, high education, professional,

⁶⁹ These events, of course, can also be read as self-gratifying celebrations of the lasting influence of an author that, beyond his inherent artistic qualities, was “employed by the British as a form of cultural colonialism” (Dickson, 2012).

managerial and white-collar groups” (Bennett, 1997: 88). This meant that, even two decades after the UK entered a post-colonial era, members of a White upper social class –to whom the nostalgic view of Chekhov was more clearly directed– still were the main audiences that filled theatrical venues in the biggest cities of the country.

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the situation apparently remained the same: 2014’s *London Theatre Report*, commissioned by *The Society of London Theatre* and the *National Theatre* (and based on a 2008 report published by *The West End Theatre Audience*), indicated that “92% of [its] respondents were white”, their “average age (...) was 43” and their “average income was £31,500” (Smith, 2014: 42). The race, wealth and income of London’s West End audiences, it seemed, had not changed much in over thirty years: an information that clashed with the social transformations of the country, ostensibly confirming that theatre not only remained an entertainment for selected circles, but that it also was a preserver of traditional social structures. However, this (somewhat depressing) picture missed some changes that took place during those intervening years, which surpassed the confines of Theatreland: as Susan Bennett (1997: 103) wrote in *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, all around Europe there was “an enormous growth since the 1970s of theatre groups that work[ed] non-traditionally”, decentring the theatrical event “both as an occasion and as a place” and no longer tying performances “to traditional spaces with a fixed audience-stage relationship”. Added to this, there was a blossoming of “many theatre groups working in less affluent urban or rural areas”, which sought “an involvement at the community level” (Bennett, 1997: 102). Rather than remaining a monolithic and immobile discourse that described one specific social class, the connotation carried by ‘theatre audiences’ acquired instead a much more elaborate meaning that mirrored the cultural enrichment of Britain and the redefinition of its notions of national identity. Even a closer look to the data coming from the West End indicated an interesting factor: out of all the attendees to plays at the

West End, only 38% were from London, while 43% came from other regions of the country and 19% from abroad (Smith, 2014: 42). Not only a considerable number of foreigners were taking part in the interpretative processes of the British stage, but also a culturally varied and less London-focused public had the opportunity to access theatre productions previously confined to the inhabitants of the capital. Also, contrary to the established preconception that the stage attracted mostly older audiences, a growing percentage of the younger generations were interested in plays: another 2013 report by Ticketmaster, which did not include information on ethnic background or nationality, pointed to a dramatic increase of young people's interest in theatre, where the "likelihood to attend" a play of 16-19 year olds reached 87%, the highest of any age group (Mermiri, 2013: 9). Just as it happened in the wider realm of national identity, new voices appeared in the theatrical world, asking for new contents that could include and represent them, and driving some theatre companies to create fresh interpretative angles of 'canonical' pieces.

Within this context, the figure of Chekhov played an important role. His status as an assimilated author led many national stagings to connect him to local melancholia, turning his plays "into celebrations of the twilit pathos of the English country gentry" (Billington, 2012); because of his foreign origin, though, and the fact that new translations of his work were constantly commissioned or selected, he still maintained a partly changing nature.⁷⁰ This is what makes the analysis of some of his international productions so attractive: because when compared to the traditional readings that his work carried since the 1920s, and by analysing their acceptance or rejection from the critical community, it is possible to discover how many of the "levels of meaning of the original text (...) the narrative, the socio-historical and the universally metaphoric" (Milner-Gulland & Soboleva, 2009: 111) were changed due to the particular preferences of the local creators. Also, the confrontation

⁷⁰ Not all local productions of Chekhov were conservative in their interpretative approach. As the third and fourth chapter of this thesis will demonstrate, some offered new readings of British national identity.

of British conceptions with other societies and stylistic trends, as expressed through reinterpretations of dialogues and scenes well known to national theatregoers thanks to decades of stagings of the same plays, created a link that would not have existed with new creations, while at the same time providing a space to reconsider preconceived ideas of cultural discourses. In a globalised world, after all, and in one of the 'hot spots' of foreign migration, the notions of 'national' and 'international' could only be downplayed; as Robert Winder (2004: 356)) wrote, "in the absence of a common flagpole on which we can host our colours, we have an identity parade".⁷¹

It is in this context that both the Sovremennik's *The Cherry Orchard* and Veronese's *Uncle Vanya* must be understood. Each one arrived to British audiences through different models of importation, whose own particularities reveal the complexities of the international theatre market within the country. The first one (used by the Sovremennik's show) was related to the independent efforts of specific venues and companies that, at different times of the year, presented foreign shows in short seasons: an operation that required careful planning and an understanding of audiences' expectations. Selected venues like the Barbican Centre in London, which turned the BITE (Barbican International Theatre Events) into "a year-round operation after the Royal Shakespeare Court left the building" in 2002 (Trueman, 2011), brought by 2010 a mix of international dance, experimental interpretations of canonical works and cutting-edge stagings of contemporary authors.⁷² In general, however, due to the expense of these endeavours and the fierce competition of the local stage, individual companies imported shows created by carefully selected (and economically profitable)

⁷¹ In the theatrical world this is even more ambiguous when considering foreign directors working with national groups: some Chekhovian examples could be *The Cherry Orchard* directed in 2009 at the Dundee Rep by the Ukrainian director Vladimir Boucher or the 2012 version of *The Three Sisters* at the Young Vic in London, under the direction of Australian Benedict Andrews. In these cases, there is a complex relationship between the ideas exposed by the director and those in charge of playing them, which poses the question if the final result is British or foreign in nature, ultimately indicating the porous quality of 'national' discourses.

⁷² 2011's season, for example, brought works like *The Tempest* by Cheek by Jowl, *The Magic Flute* by Peter Brook, *The Blue Dragon* by Robert Lepage and *Wunderkammer* by Circa (Brown, 2011).

companies, as it was the case of the Young Vic's support of the Belarus Free Theatre or the National Theatre partnership with the South African Handspring Puppet Company.⁷³ In the West End, too, specific shows were presented, like the monologue *Doktor Glas* interpreted by Swedish actor Kristen Henriksson, which received a relatively extended run (16 April to 11 May 2013) thanks to its sole performer's extra-theatrical British success as detective Wallander in the eponymous television series⁷⁴: a situation that revealed the mixture of extra-theatrical agendas and commercial-aesthetic interests that reflected audiences' tastes and pointed to subtle shifts in the notions of national identity.

A more encompassing, but also perhaps more limiting, view of these changes can be found in the second model of theatrical importation, through which Veronese's *Uncle Vanya* reached national audiences: annual theatre festivals. Indeed, in the contemporary theatrical universe of the UK is common to find, at different times of the year, cultural events that in a short period of time present a diversity of theatrical, artistic and cultural shows: the most recognisable being the Edinburgh International Festival and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, established in 1946 and 1947 respectively, which have "consistently imported productions by major international companies" including the Comedie Française in 1948, the Grotowski Laboratory Theatre in 1968 and the Berliner Ensemble in 1984 (Harvie, 2005: 124). Their appearance just after the end of World War II is very instructive, not only in the sense that it reveals how the country started to explore foreign achievements after a period of exacerbated nationalisms, providing "a platform for the flowering of the human spirit", but also how eager were internal cultures to be influenced by overseas discourses (Towse, 2010: 519).⁷⁵ The more traditional postures of the colonial centre faced cultural exchanges, reflecting a

⁷³ More information in Kaliada, 2013, and Handspring Puppet Company, n.d.

⁷⁴ More information in <http://www.boxoffice.co.uk/arts-and-theatre-tickets/plays/doktor-glas-tickets.aspx>

⁷⁵ This was not an unique historical development of Britain; the Avignon Festival also started in 1947.

society that was discovering a more complex identity due to continuing decolonisation; paralleling its increased diversity, economic success and globalisation processes, a series of annual art festivals flourished, covering all styles of performing expression and creating a kaleidoscopic mixture of co-productions and collaborations with external cultural forces. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the panorama looked richer than ever: events such as the London Mime Festival, Suspense Puppetry Festival or CASA Latin American Theatre Festival (Harvie, 2005: 126; Trueman, 2011), focused on specific performative genres or theatrical regions, were presented parallel to the Manchester International Festival or the Brighton Festival, which –whether state sponsored or not– provided “a city or other location with an image and a cultural identity (...) [and] external production economies (spillovers) for the tourist trade by attracting visitors”, among other important elements (Towse, 2010: 513). Understandably, these agendas influenced the selection of each show; to fully understand their impact within the communities of the host country it is not enough to consider them independently, but as part of a web of interpretative forces that included the geographical location of the event, the past history of the festival, the personal interests of the artistic curators and even the symbolic connection between two or more shows. The result of this analysis, as the Chekhovian cases explored in this chapter will demonstrate, allow both a cultural understanding and the comprehension of the legacies of colonialism in the contemporary world.

In the following sections, then, the two mentioned shows will be considered, thus underlining the impact of the producers who brought them to the UK. Through them, Chekhovian dramaturgy will be seen as a bridge between established cultural values and politic-aesthetic polemics: in the *Sovremennik*’s case this will illuminate the ties between the country and a capitalistic Russian community, while Veronese’s production will explore the tense bonds between the former Empire and an Argentinian society that –influenced by its own political agendas– criticised the legacies of colonialism and the excesses of neoliberal policies. Also, by considering the critical reception both

shows got after their British premieres, conservative and progressive notions of cultural identity will be exposed, indicating the political value that they had in the understanding of the country's transformations.

2. Sovremennik Theatre's *The Cherry Orchard* (28 – 29 January 2011)

To fully understand the impact of the Sovremennik's production on British audiences, it is important to start the analysis by considering how the West End season of the company, which took place between 21 and 29 January 2011, was publicized in different media as “the first time in more than 20 years that a leading Russian theatre company has visited the capital” (London Theatre Direct, 2011; Ticketmaster, 2011; Woolman, 2011). The ambiguous concept of a ‘leading’ company allowed the tour's publishers to claim a fact that was dubious at best: the renowned Maly Drama Theatre of St. Petersburg (founded in 1943), for example, repeatedly visited London during the previous 15 years, presenting –among others plays– a three-part dramatization of Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* in 1998 and Shakespeare's *King Lear* in 2006 (What's On Stage, 1998; Gardner, 2006). In any case, the fact that this point was raised so assiduously demonstrated the propagandistic value given by the producers to the show within London's theatrical environment, stressing its symbolic value as the re-establisher of cultural-political relationships between Russia and the UK.

Indeed, at the time the Russian actors arrived to the British capital to perform their three shows at the Noel Coward Theatre, the two countries were going through a critical phase of their foreign relations. Different events had led to this situation: starting with the 2003 British refusal to extradite tycoon Boris Berezovsky and Chechen separatist Akhmed Zakayev, and following an early 2006 accusation of espionage by the Russian government against some internationally-supported NGOs, the situation escalated later in the same year with the poisoning in London of former KGB agent

Alexander Litvinenko, who just before his death blamed Vladimir Putin's administration for orchestrating a plot to silence him. This led to a diplomatic row between both countries, where British accusations that the Russian police blocked the investigation and refused to extradite "Andrei Lugovoy, a former KGB agent (and Duma deputy since December 2007)" as a suspect of the crime were counteracted by the Russian's government 2008 "limitations on the activities on the Russian section of the BBC" and the closure of two offices of the British Council under the charges of tax fraud and supporting of illegal espionage (Ćwiek-Karpowicz & Znojek, 2009). Even in the artistic world there were uncomfortable situations: an exhibition of international artwork was compromised due to the Russian government's fear that part of its lot could be retained due to ongoing conflicts of ownership, and a new law had to be approved in the UK before the situation could be satisfactorily solved (BBC, 2007). The relatively smooth arrival of the *Sovremennik* season in London, then, was an exceptional situation at a historical moment when, according to MI5, Russian infiltration was considered to be at "Cold War levels" (Norton-Taylor, 2010).

The shows' positive reception also suggested the dominant presence of their sponsor and producer: oligarch Roman Abramovich. Certainly, this man is an essential piece of the puzzle to understand the politics behind 2011's Russia – UK relations, which went well beyond the historical events described above: after all, his life reflected in many ways the transformations of Britain's national identity during the 21st century. First of all, through him it is possible to realize the true extent of the economic links between the two countries, which preceded the events of the early 2000s: after the fall of the Soviet Union the UK benefited from the exploitation of the vast gas and petroleum resources offered by its counterpart, which for many years had remained inaccessible due to the economic impossibility of the state to exploit them to their full potential. Whether through direct participation with multinational companies like British Petroleum, collaborations with Russian impresarios that built economic emporiums during the 1990s, or (after Vladimir Putin's arrival to

power) governmental alliances, both countries acquired mutually beneficial ties; that's why by 2012 almost 50% of the UK coal imports came from Russia (Webster, 2013), while in Russia "Shell and BP [had] both invested heavily in oil and gas extraction and exploration" and "Astra Zeneca and GSK [had] major investments in [the country's] growing pharmaceuticals market" (Potter, 2011). It was an economically valuable development, useful for both private and public British organisations, that were threatened by the harmful effects of the diplomatic crisis mentioned above: it was necessary, sooner or later, to attempt a cultural and political reconciliation in order to avoid (among other things) an energy crisis.

In this context, Abramovich was a mediator, a 'bridge' who represented not only the socio-cultural exchanges between the two countries, but also the Russian diaspora whose influence and wealth had become part of the cultural identity of the UK. His biography is in that extent revealing: having grown up in the depressed economic environment of the 1980s Soviet Union, he embraced the possibilities offered by the perestroika and later on by the political collapse to build in less than a decade an emporium centred in resale, production of consumer goods and oil trading, as well as a political capital that led to his friendship with Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin and his assignment as the governor of the Russian region of Chukotka between 2000 and 2008 (Daily Telegraph, 2011b). His was a story of capitalist success that paralleled the neoliberal postulates promoted by Thatcher and Gorbachev in their respective administrations: in his skill to sort out difficulties through borderline legal strategies (including bribery), he embodied a generation that (both in Russia and the UK) defended individualistic and privatized notions of economic control. But also, from a more personal perspective, he was a symbol of the arrival of "a steady drumbeat of oligarchs" who, "snapping up exorbitantly priced Chelsea mansions [and] buying the odd football team", turned the UK and particularly London into a "playground and sanctuary" for economic success (Forston, 2013), embracing some parts of British identity while simultaneously shaping some of its cultural

components. It is then appropriate that someone like him could use his power to acclimatize a restoration of more stable bilateral relationships.

The London presentation of the Sovremennik's *Cherry Orchard* could be read then as a propagandistic attempt by Abramovich done with the managerial support of theatre impresario Sir Cameron Mackintosh (owner of the theatre where the show was presented), which aimed to promote inside British critical circles a more sympathetic view of Russia and to celebrate the empowerment of self-made oligarchs like himself. Also, it served as a further confirmation of the growing influence of the community of Russian émigrés in the British capital: a community that, according to estimates of the Office for National Statistics, reached 46,000 Russian-born residents by 2012 and over 300,000 persons of Russian descent (Office of National Statistics, 2012; Work Permit, 2006).⁷⁶ This was not by any means a monolithic group: just like other immigration populations, it was a mixture of wealthy businessmen, an upper middle class that could “afford a \$2 million apartment in cash”, “Russian dissidents and artists in exile [that] praise[d] London for its adherence to laws and its political freedoms”, and “highly educated professionals with low prospects for appropriate incomes” in their country of origin (Work Permit, 2006). However, due to the geographical distances, the fact that Russia did not belong to the European Union (therefore limiting the working possibilities for its nationals), and the bureaucratic difficulties of obtaining a visa for non-skilled workers (whose potential positions in Britain were already taken by Polish, Ukrainian and Czech labourers), the majority of this diaspora shared at least a high educational level and a potentially long-lasting impact in the demography of the host country due to the “myth [that]

⁷⁶ This statistic did not even consider over 600,000 immigrants from Eastern European countries where, due to a common historical background and a (not always positive) political relationship during the communist era, the influence of Russia was significant, regarding both the linguistic imposition of Russian as a *lingua franca* and the sharing of worldviews that –all together– created new alliances in the culturally-varied space of the UK.

says the best place to send your kids to school is England” (Harding, 2013).⁷⁷ Also, the wealthy section of the community decisively impacted in the economic development of the country: according to Hermitage Capital, “between 1998 and 2004 \$102 billion in capital is estimated to have left Russia”, of which a significant part was invested in the UK in real estate, jewellery, cars and home commodities (Work Permit, 2006). Ultimately there was a communion of ideals, where the governmental support of the privatization of merchandises, the legislative laxness on tax and off-shore policies⁷⁸, and the privileged position of the country as the centre of corporative empires blended with the ambitions of a Russian generation of entrepreneurial tycoons, Lopakhin’s heirs in the neoliberal Western world: together they reinforced a notion of nation that worked more towards the success of a selected number of individuals.

These discourses permeated the performance of *The Cherry Orchard* at the beginning of 2011; they were suggested in the high price of the tickets and the sumptuous quality of the programs. However, this did not mean that the season was a mere act of self-satisfying gratification: on the contrary, part of the interest of the production came from the palpable tension between the abovementioned agendas and the intentions of the troupe on stage, eager to share with foreign audiences and Russian émigrés the ideologies that propelled their work, and to protest –in the words of its director Galina Volchek– “against the preponderance of lies in art and life” and “the invisible yet solid wall” that separated art from life, preventing a socially-committed dramatic style (quoted by Jeffries,

⁷⁷ “Last month [April 2013] figures from the Independent Schools Council revealed a stunning increase in the number of Russian pupils studying at UK private schools, up from 816 in 2007 (3.9% of all overseas pupils) to 2,150 in 2013 (8.3%). The largest number of overseas boarding students come from Hong Kong and China, followed by Germany. But it is the Russians, in fourth place, who are the fastest-growing national group, with Britain and its private schools increasingly attractive to parents from Moscow and St Petersburg. But why? According to Irina Shumovitch, an educational consultant who runs a placement service for Russian parents, British education has an unbeatable reputation” (Harding, 2013).

⁷⁸ Despite the economic crisis of 2008, the UK offered for years “unique tax advantages to people with assets offshore”, avoiding the payment of “taxes on worldwide income and capital gains” (Work Permit, 2006). Only after a second recession in 2011 timid policies started to be considered to control these excesses, like the obligation to declare all international savings: final and general laws, as of 2016, hadn’t been approved yet.

2011). It's a paradox that showed not only the contradictions of contemporary Russia but also those between British nationals and wealthy émigrés, and that can only be comprehended when considering the Sovremennik's history: one that mixed political resistance, fights against censorship and internal divisions. Founded by a group of actors from the 'Studio of Young Actors' of the MAT in 1956, during the beginning of the Space Race and in the middle of increasing Cold War tensions, the company's first leader (during the first 14 years of its existence) was the celebrated actor and director Oleg Yefremov, who opposed to the "problems of collective leadership" and the incapacity "to make contact with its contemporaries" of the ossified Moscow Art Theatre a psychological realism where there was "not an aim at outward verisimilitude, using neither make-up nor elaborate costume nor any effective *mise-en-scène*", but instead a "desire to find and express the truth", where "the actor's personality remains visible as he lives through the character's train of thought and identifies psychologically with him" (Beumers, 1999: 361-362). These ideas turned the Sovremennik into one of the most relevant troupes of the Muscovite dramatic scene of the 1960s, despite a difficult relationship with authorities where "interpretations were often criticised, [and] the repertoire, with too many contemporary plays (...) was overseen with great suspicion" (Beumers, 1999: 362).

The untimely departure of Yefremov and some of the lead actors in 1970 in order to return to the MAT temporarily threatened the continuity of these ideals, but 1972's election of Galina Volchek as the Head Art Director led to a second era of stability, where the work of important novelists such as Chingiz Aytmatov and Konstantin Simonov was adapted to the stage, dramas by Russian playwrights "Alexander Galin, Nikolai Koliadi and Mikhail Kononov" were presented, and a focus on (especially after the beginning of the 21th century) canonical international authors such as "Schiller, Shaw, Williams" and more contemporary creators such as "Yasmina Reza and Yosef Bar-Yosef" indicated a desire to escape the constraints of nationalistic conventions (Kuznetzova, 2011: 7-8). Another

adaptation, this time from a novel by Eugenia Ginzburg, brought the biggest success of the company's history: 1989's *Into the Whirlwind*, which in its harrowing depiction of Stalinist oppression "demonstrated that the artistic style of the entire collective as well as its civil and human convictions were mature" (Sovremennik Theatre), while preparing them for the capitalist challenges of 1990s Russia. At this particular period, despite economic difficulties, the company presented some of the highlights of their repertory in New York in 1997: "it was the first time a Russian troupe had played on Broadway after the famous tour of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1924", and the success of the stagings "was demonstrated by the theatre receiving the Drama Desk Award, a national prize in the USA for dramatic art" (Kuznetzova, 2011: 9). By the time of its arrival in London, therefore, the company carried behind a turbulent yet successful 55-year-long history: having developed a strong sense of belonging and identity, and preserving a recognisable style despite administrative or artistic renovations, it expressed in its interpretation of *The Cherry Orchard* the challenges of these political and social events.

The three selected shows for the London season were the same as those presented in the US more than a decade before: alongside Chekhov's classics *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, representatives of a respected national past, the aforementioned *Into the Whirlwind* proposed a confrontation with one of the country's darkest periods. It was a repetition that mixed commercial pragmatism –with the company presenting shows whose success with foreign audiences had been proven already⁷⁹– and a declaration of political-artistic ideals, indicating the beauty and tragedy experienced by both pre-revolutionary generations and those who lived throughout the communist regime. "In these performances, the company is presented very widely. There is the young company and [their] quite famous masters, as it were, of the scene, of the stage", said artistic director Galina

⁷⁹ It can only be wondered if Abramovich influenced this decision, since it suggested a businessmen-like mentality that played safe on confirmed successes.

Volchek in an extensive article written by Natalie Woolman for *The Stage*. Metaphorically, the scenic space became Russia, and the 45 actors who stayed in London for a week were turned into its multifarious citizens⁸⁰: a proposition that, before the shows were presented, led some to doubt if the stagings would translate well to British audiences. Regarding Ginzburg's adaptation, *The Stage's* journalist described her fears of the reliance "on a shared knowledge of Russian history in order to wreak its full force on the audience. (...) In Moscow, knowledge of the historical backdrop can be assumed, but in London, I am not sure" (Woolman, 2011). Despite his widespread recognition in the UK, something similar could have happened with a Russian performance of Chekhov, particularly of *The Cherry Orchard* and its political connotations: taken not as a dramatic artefact that emphasised the longing of an imperial idea but as a pungent metaphor of the political past of the Motherland, the whole show might have alienated British and other non-Russian English-speaking spectators. But this view was based on the anachronistic generalisation that considered a British White person as the only possible audience member in London: going back to the statistics presented at the introduction of this chapter, the reality was that by 2011 people of foreign ancestry were now part of the country's society, and that a constant flow of tourists saw the capital as a theatrical Mecca.⁸¹

In this particular case, the presentations created a strong cultural reaction where the influence of Russian émigrés –themselves part of the UK's identity tapestry– was essential. Reviewers were quick to point it out: Vera Liber of *The British Theatre Guide* noted the huge amount of "Russians filling the auditorium" (2011), while Matt Wolf in *The Arts Desk* specifically portrayed the Slavs as "a self-evidently reverential audience awash in bling" (2011). Together with the actors, they formed a

⁸⁰ This is the case, of course, of every touring company. As the next pages will indicate, however, the selected productions and their politically charged interpretations added an extra value to this symbolism.

⁸¹ According to Visit Britain, "based on information drawn from the 2011 Office for National Statistics International Passenger Survey, take in a show while on holiday in the UK, (...) an incredible 2.8 million overseas [theatre] visitors" added "£2.7 billion to the UK economy, more than double the £1.1 billion spent by live sports visitors" (Amer, 2013).

gripping sociological portrait, exposing conventional cultural codes and contemporary interests of two different yet connected Russian communities. For instance, following traditions that in Britain are closer to opera and ballet houses but that in Russia are common within the theatrical universe, nearly all of the Slavic spectators applauded when the cast made “a grand entrance in the first act and [struck] a tableau down stage centre”, while many women flocked “towards them and [offered] bouquets” as a ritualistic token of appreciation (Spencer, 2011); at the same time, with their profuse display of furs and jewellery, they were illustrated as being at odds with a troupe that despite their definition as “contemporary” (a literal translation of their name) were re-presenting a classically inspired 1997 production, using many of the original actors⁸² and defending still a defiant aesthetic posture that clashed with the gentrified tendencies of the spectators. It was a striking combination of the old-fashioned values of the company, “still marinated in the Soviet system of Honoured People's Artists, the privileged aristocracy of that era” (Liber, 2011), and an audience as interested in the exhibition of their wealth, their post-Thatcherite individual success, as in the show itself. “One might say paraphrasing Gogol – why are you laughing and applauding? You are laughing at yourselves”, added Liber: a revealing appreciation that connected the show to a distinguished literary figure called by Chekhov in 1889 “the greatest of Russian writers” (Chekhov, 1920), and that pointed out the irony and tragicomic quality of the characters on and off the stage. In their pompous attitudes and self-celebratory monologues, figures like the gout-afflicted landowner Pishchik or the boastful maid Dunyasha seemed to mock the outlandish viewers of the Noël Coward Theatre⁸³; characters from a ‘crumbling’ past ridiculed the forces pointing to a supposedly powerful and

⁸² According to the company’s website, which has a comprehensive virtual archive of original reviews and production photos, the 1997 production had a very similar cast: Maria Neelova as Ranevskaya, Igor Kvasha as Gayev and Sergey Garmash as Lopakhin (among others) reprised their roles during the 2011 London tour. More information in <http://www.sovremennik.ru/play/about.asp?id=10>.

⁸³ This particular name adds to the satire, bearing in mind its direct reference to one of the most sophisticated British writers of the inter-war period: indeed, the excessive antics of particular members of the public could have inspired an updated version of *Hay Fever*.

‘progressive’ future. This also reinvigorated two central forces of the play: Marina Neelova as Madame Ranevskaya and Sergei Garmash as Lopakhin were the most celebrated performances, due to the subtlety of their expression and the intimate, almost loving connection between them.⁸⁴ Together, they did not seem to clash (as in many other adaptations of the show) but to complement each other, becoming tragicomic figures overlooking with pride and pain the results of capitalist change.

The play was not intended only for the Russian community of London, though; the copious advertisement through leaflets and Tube posters, and the lengthy articles dedicated to the tour that appeared in newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent* hinted both at the power of Abramovich in the national media and an attempt to “provide information and form consumers’ tastes” through the use of varied “gate-keepers” – that is, to attract audiences through the ‘seduction’ of cultural journalists and the critical community (Towse, 2010: 155). Also, the fact that the theatre’s owner himself openly reminded readers that the show was presented at the same venue where “the 1936 production of *The Seagull* directed by Theodor Komisarjevsky” premiered (Mackintosh, 2011: 3) suggested a desire to connect it with the most entrenched interpretations of the author in the country: after all, Komis’ “endlessly beautiful” production had not only confirmed the director’s nostalgic interpretation but also expanded it by introducing it to wider West End audiences (McVay, 1993: 79).

⁸⁴ Back in 1997 Neelova was equally celebrated during the New York run of the show; *The New York Times* presented her as a “heartbreaking center of gravity” who pulled off “the stunning trick of seeming to shrink and age as the full force of her destitution hits her” (Marks). Garmash was described as a “Donald Trump in what can only be described as a power cutaway” (Marks), but the emphasis on his connection to Neelova, or the symbolic comparison between him and some audience members was not present. Instead, the production served as a platform to reflect on the social transformations of late 1990s Russia: “in the bourgeois ambition of Lopakhin, especially, you can feel the worlds of pre-revolutionary and post-Soviet Russia in a kind of alignment. (...) ‘I am a bank clerk now,’ says Gayev. ‘I am a financier,’ which, you can imagine, some of the reinvented members of the old Russian guard saying on the streets of Moscow today” (Marks).

Perhaps influenced by all these (hyperbolic) advertisements, and added to the genuine interest that the visit of such an iconic Russian company generated in audiences, the general response was excellent: presentations were sold-out well ahead of time, and distinguished figures of the British stage, academic researchers and theatre aficionados completed the public, perhaps anxious to see (and to be seen in) a well-regarded presentation of a classic play. What was their interpretation? Though a total answer is impossible due to the huge amount of individual interpretations, an analysis of the different positions of the critical community, with their agreements, disagreements and ideological agendas, is useful in the way it reveals, beyond mere aesthetic-theatrical interpretations, the characteristic negotiations proper to the constant updating of social identities.

The previously mentioned criticisms about the presence of a Slavic bourgeois class, for example, can be seen through a different angle: even if the description of their tawdry ostentation was accurate, it is also true that the attacks of some reviewers revealed an implicit defence of a way of understanding Chekhovian dramaturgy. When Charles Spencer commented that “in comparison with top-grade British productions of his plays, Galina Volchek’s staging seems hit and miss, sometimes perverse, and at times downright vulgar” (Spencer, 2011), it is evident that beyond the theatrical criticism lay also his own position as part of a centre-right wing newspaper, who had defined a year before –during the 150th anniversary of the writer’s birth– his view of Chekhov as an “invisible” entity, that simply “shows how people really behave” and that makes spectators “forget that we are looking at art and seem to be in the midst of the messy, funny, sad chaos of life” (Spencer, 2010). This reinforced a pragmatic and non-political perspective of the Russian author, where the “over-emphasis on individual characteristics trivializes social significance” (Gottlieb, 1993: 149), and continued an interpretation that underlined the aristocratic airs of celebrated thespians and the delicate enchantment of melancholia. The social complexities suggested by the *Sovremennik* staging, then, with a group of actors still very much influenced by a performance style

and a political bent proper to Soviet Russia, were lost under a patina of critical misunderstanding. Of course, this bias cannot be generalized or used to invalidate the critical views of all local commentators; it must be remembered after all how non-Russian speakers were forced to read “condensed, translated [surtitles] (...) manually projected onto the stage” (Griesel, 2005) and confront unfamiliar cultural and aesthetic codes. Their misunderstandings and criticisms should be better understood as different reactions to the influence of ‘foreign’ discourses inside the multicultural UK, and therefore as important –if incomplete– views of the tapestry of social views present in the country.

A first point of contested opinions, patent from the moment the first thespian entered the scene, was the cast itself. It was shocking for many to discover that certain actors (with the exception of Viktoria Romanenko’s Anya) were too old for their roles. The most criticised case was that of Valery Shalnykh as the valet Yasha: “Why is the predatory young footman”, wondered Spencer, “played here by a camp and portly middle-aged man who seems entirely uninterested in sexual conquest?” (2011). The questioning was connected to what the critic saw as a radical departure from the ages presented in the original text: according to this, 63-year-old Neelova did not fit Ranevsakya’s role, intended for an actress at least fifteen years younger, while Garmash’s Lopakhin had a slight stoop that added a touch of mortal reticence to his projects of an all-encompassing future. Nevertheless, this overlooked the symbolic importance of the show’s ensemble, formed by performers working together for decades: a common trend among Russian companies, initiated with Stanislavsky’s troupe and then developed throughout the communist era, partly due to a pragmatic need to resist political oppression and economic adversities (including the fall of the USSR and the economic crisis of the 1990s), and partly because of a deeply embedded tradition to create a coherent artistic testament: as Sovremennik’s first artistic director Yefremov said once, “a theatre is a community of people, who breathe the same air and share the same ideas. Theatre is ten hearts beating in unison,

ten minds searching for answers to the questions of life which worry each of us individually. A theatre collective is an artist" (quoted by Beumers, 1999: 362). In this particular case, then, the ensemble was a mixture of dramatic preferences and a resistance against internal divisions and governmental censorship; the presence of a determinate performer in a role –somehow his or her 'property' inside the troupe– was connected to historical memories and "extra-textual connotations which played no small part in the audience's decoding of the text" (Elam, 2002: 77). Beyond their physical inappropriateness the legacy of their position and the political connotations of their performance created an interpretative layer that prevailed over a chronological coherence or a celebration of individualistic traits.

In 1997, during the New York tour, *The New York Times* captured this factor, considering the show as a timely reflection on the then fresh "social upheaval" of the country, a bridge between "the worlds of pre-revolutionary and post-Soviet Russia" (Marks, 1997). Fourteen years later, a similar political value could have been pointed out, specifically referring to the presence of Abramovich as a producer and the policies behind the staging that reflected the ambivalent relationship between a Russia anxious to enter into the capitalistic world while still cautious of international threats to its sovereignty, and a UK increasingly dependent on international investment but eager to find a coherent notion of national identity. Instead, due to the assimilated view of the Russian author as a creator of individual psychologies without strong political backgrounds, reviewers like Spencer saw the Russian production through the lens of old-fashioned theatrical techniques and tragicomic excesses, without realizing that these traditional discourses did not grasp in all of its complexity a world transformed by globalised politics and fast Internet connections.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Despite its critical success and lasting legacy, the 1923-24 American tour of the MAT presented an anachronistic view of the company, showing productions that were in some cases "twenty years old (...) and had already toured Europe in 1906" (Worrall, 1996: 4); they were generally *older* than the ones brought by

The tone of the performances, and some of the stylistic flourishes connected to them, was another element full of revealing tensions: some members of the British critical circles critics saw the interpretations as farcical and superficial, an example of light theatrical entertainment. Olga Drozdova's Charlotta, for example, was criticised as "exaggeratedly deranged" by Henry Hitchings, a critic of the free newspaper *London Evening Standard*⁸⁶; her antics, especially a silent pantomime at the beginning of the second act, were considered cartoonish and unrealistic. She was not alone: to different degrees, almost every other performance was accused of being at odds with subtler 'psychological' interpretations. "Many members of the cast seem to be giving flashy solo turns and the whole show often has the feel of a variety show rather than a deeply moving play", wrote Spencer: an interpretation that shows –yet again– a predetermined posture about Chekhov's 'correct' interpretation, where actors must "dig deeply into their roles" and explore "the painful transience of life" (Spencer, 2011), subordinating every moment of humour to tragic, or at least melancholy, connotations. This negated the comedic charm reiterated by Chekhov himself and counteracted since Stanislavsky's times⁸⁷; an approach that carried a political vibe since it subtly mocked the cultural foibles of every social class, and that in the UK had been restrained from the times of Komisarjevsky with the recurring use of more tragic approaches. No doubt influenced by their turbulent past, the Sovremennik emphasised instead the lighter approach, which resulted in a change of tone and rhythm: impressionistic passages were "undercut (...) with a comic gesture, interruption, action, or even a sound" (Gottlieb, 2001); events unravelled at a faster pace. Through

the Sovremennik to London in 2011. It can be wondered if a modern Stanislavski would have gotten a similar level of recognition had he ever toured with so many 'ancient' creations...

⁸⁶ Curiously enough, in 2009 this paper was bought by Russian businessman and former KGB agent Alexander Lebedev and his son Evgeny Lebedev, also owners of *The Independent*.

⁸⁷ Stanislavsky came from an aristocratic family, having changed his original surname (Alekseyev) to avoid his family the 'shame' of being connected to an actor. His preference for a tragic reading of Chekhov's plays – whose author had a humble origin – could be connected to a political interest to celebrate, or at least to present with a commiserative veil of sadness, a society that the writer felt it should be seen with a detached sense of irony and an understanding –yet not forgiving– humour.

careful timing, the jokes did not weaken the dramatic material, but forced spectators to recognise the comic fallibilities of the characters, and to see them from a more critical position, where their fallibilities could become symbolic of their class or situation. Charlotta's second act opening was representative: what was a relatively short intervention in the original text was turned into a full-bodied, five-minute long sequence. Humming songs in the foreground and using a rifle as a multi-purpose prop –turning it into a toy or a dance partner– Drozdova implied a long-lost love, her burning desire for affection and her position as an outsider in the transitional universe of the drama. This produced a series of comic vignettes that dug deeper into what Saverly Senderovich described as “the magic power of presentation possessed by a dramatic actress” (2009: 22): a rich display of the character's individuality, her theatrical nature and her underlying social situation. So, when tears came to her eyes at the end while holding a bundle shaped like a baby, the intention was not to produce mawkish effects but to connect the character to humanistic undertones where the struggles of a migrant reflected the challenge of cultural communication. It was a powerful, and probably even unintended, symbol of the contradictions present in the Noël Coward theatre: in the suffering and emotional intensity Drozdova conferred to her character Charlotta, she almost recalled the difficulties of the British mixture of many cultural forces, including Russian émigrés, old-school Russian artists, a critical community whose readings of national identity ranged from monolithic to progressive, and audiences whose cultural origins were as diverse as their gender, social class and age. It is revealing that, when describing her performance, Hitchings (2011) considered it “exaggeratedly deranged” while Matt Wolf from *The Stage* (2011) celebrated her “mock-severe” attitude and revealing edge of lunacy: an indication of the deeply contradictory processes of interpretation and exchange present in the country.

A third critical ‘hot-spot’ was the physicality used by the cast. As Hitchings put it, “expressiveness is the keynote of the performances”: through orchestrated waves of movement and stillness, which

included jumps, chases, spins, dancing movements and moments of statuesque immobility, the actors accentuated moments of suffocating “*poshlost* (...), banality or drabness” (Gottlieb, 2001), and expressed the concealed fears and expectations of their characters. Neelova, in consonance with the flamboyant nature of her role, “all but [made] love to the table in the nursery” to express the delight of her return, jangled two champagne glasses “together in a semi-aware surrender to agitation”, and “stiffened visibly” when confronted to the inescapable truth of the orchard’s sale (Wolf, 2011); Varya’s occasional bursts of passion (like the hurl of the estate keys on the floor at the end of the third act) revealed her frustration behind a façade of hard work and respectability; and Dunyasha’s coquettish gestures and self-taught aristocratic mannerisms added an arresting grotesquerie to her doomed love for Yasha. Yet the most revealing case is one of reticence: Lopakhin, generally performed by Gurmash with a low-key, almost butler-esque diffidence, expressed his victory in the auction in an elegantly articulated tirade that trapped the other characters in a frozen position of powerlessness. British critics reacted with unanimous praise: Spencer (2011) commented on the “powerful mixture of energy, insensitivity, candour and guilt”, while Hitchings (2011) celebrated how the actor endowed “the pragmatic Lopakhin with just the right amount of self-consciousness”. Beyond the undeniable qualities of the performer, it is interesting how reviewers celebrated the actor whose interpretative centre lay in the voice and the use of eloquent dramatic speeches: an interest that revealed, once more, a traditional British preference for language and the presentation of emotions through verbal methods⁸⁸, not connected this time to the celebration of the expressive powers of the English language but powerful enough to lead to the accusation of excess and ‘vulgarity’ to those cast members who used more physical forms of communication. This missed not only Russia’s cultural and aesthetic subtleties but also the different political conditions between the two countries: carrying the heritage of the tsarist and

⁸⁸ Here it can be remembered Peter Hall’s 2009 production of *Swansong*, analysed in the previous chapter.

Soviet censorship, where improper words could lead to unforeseen consequences, Sovremennik's actors revealed the silent liberty of the body; mixing Meyerholdian bio-mechanic techniques with a more conventional approach to psychological profiling that connected them to Stanislavsky (Sovremennik's first generation of actors being after all graduates of the MAT), they defended a style that counteracted the most traditional Chekhovian stagings in the UK, with its repertoire of forlorn gestures and painful silences. The criticisms, then, highlighted a very conscious decision of the company while at the same time missing its political value –an element that could have been useful to understand the interconnecting realities of the host country.

A fourth and final point that generated a fair amount of opposing critical views was the carnivalesque tone adopted by the show. Music, for example, was used not merely as a connecting link between the scenes but also to underscore the protagonists' sentiments, accompanying and even guiding the movements of everyone on stage. The party sequence was the epitome of this achievement: a carnival parade conducted by Charlotta, with a rifle raised and a handkerchief tied as a peace flag on top, breaking from time to time the sense of interior and exterior and leaving behind a trace of laughter and foreboding disgrace: it was an overcharged, almost expressionist set-piece of "seemingly incidental details", bombastic melodies and general excess, which pierced the comfortable space of social realism and "invited to step into [a] region of deeper meanings" and fearsome connotations (Senderovich, 2009: 10).⁸⁹ A nightmarish clash of upsetting emotions was achieved, using a Gogolian "grotesque (...) and satirical realism" (Gottlieb, 1989: 167) that reinstated political instabilities 'beautified' in more conservative productions: significantly, with the exception of a brief mention by Vera Liber from *The British Theatre Guide*, none of the local reviewers

⁸⁹ In the cacophonous mixture of voices and songs, in Ranevskaya's growing pathos against the backdrop of a decadent festivity, Vsevolod Meyerhold's description of the third act's musicality as a "'stomping' [where] Horror enters unnoticed by everyone" and there is "a gaiety in which sounds of death [and] something Maeterlinck-like frightful" is heard (quoted by Innes, 2000: 179), could not have been more adequately depicted.

mentioned it, focusing instead in individual performances. Constrained partly by their unawareness of cultural codes like the way collective historical memories were carried by many Russians, they did not uncover the sadness hidden behind the exuberant activity; by focusing –and occasionally attacking– the way personal psychologies were affected by the general satirical tone, they undermined the political connotations and subtexts of the show.

Misinterpretations were therefore a recurrent presence of the critical reception: out of the reading of the mixed reviews published in British newspapers and Internet pages, and despite different degrees of acceptance or rejection, it is possible to trace an incomprehension that is not only symptomatic of a natural cultural gap, but also of the clash between the assimilated British view of Chekhov and that of a more edgy, political Russian reading. What is curious is that, far from this creating a lukewarm public response, it ran in contrast with the economic success of the show and its popularity in the British capital: something connected once more to Abramovich, who invited different members of the press (Stuart Jeffries from *The Guardian* and Natalie Woolman from *The Stage*) to Moscow to interview director Galina Volchek and other cast members before their trip, facilitating the process of “cultural consumption” by ‘helping’ audiences “to judge whether they like it or not” the final presented cultural artefact (Towse, 2010: 152).⁹⁰ Even if not necessarily positive, the show got a huge amount of publicity not frequently given to international shows (compared, for example, with the fewer reviews received by many foreign shows presented at the Barbican); despite contradictions and tensions, the abovementioned reception by the diaspora community of the city indicated the existence of a strong market for these Russian companies. In fact, after the *Sovremennik*’s success the same theatrical producer, Cameron Mackintosh, sponsored a series of Russian Chekhovian productions in the West End, such as the Vakhtangov Theatre’s *Uncle Vanya* at

⁹⁰ Revealingly, *The Guardian* did not review the production itself: more than the aesthetic product, what mattered were the economic and socio-political implications of the show’s importation to the British capital.

the end of 2012 and Andre Konchalovsky's *Three Sisters* in April 2014, which was part of a wider celebration of the "2014 United Kingdom-Russia Year of Culture" intended "to boost cultural ties" and that for some analysts "invited speculation about a dawn in United Kingdom-Russia relations" (Kogut, 2013). The 2011 season, though, successfully preceded this, starting the thaw of bi-lateral relationships; the Russian oligarch, as Putin's close aid and friend, should have congratulated himself for his triumph, which even re-configured some of the initial interpretations of this particular version of *The Cherry Orchard*. After all, what was originally a production based on Soviet aesthetic trends was transformed thanks to his participation into the symbol of a new Russian generation, hungry to succeed through capitalistic and free-market innovations: a sleight of hand that, if judged by the number of Russian émigrés in the audience, the amount of bouquets received by the actors (Woolman, 2011) and the intensity of the applause at the end of every show, was remarkably achieved.

The success revealed another important element: the limitations of the most traditional quarters of the critical community to fully understand the show and its social ramifications in both Russia and the UK. Taking into consideration the diversity of attendees mentioned by the reviewers themselves, it is revealing how some failed to grasp the show's reception through the light of new cultural communities that had transformed aesthetic paradigms and monolithic British notions of identity. The assimilated understanding of Chekhov, despite still being accepted by many upper-middle and upper class theatregoers (as indicated by the success of the conservative Chekhovian productions presented in the previous chapter of this work), proved when applied to the Sovremennik's production its limitations to capture all the complexities of 21st century Britain, where the idea of 'foreign' and 'local' blurred due to the extensive mixing of cultural discourses within the nation. At the end, the readings it suggested hindered the understanding of the subtleties of the show, and prevented a more complete awareness of the social forces at stake both in the

stage and among the audience. There were many tensions: critics vs. audiences and/or performers, actors vs. audiences, émigrés vs. native Russians, post-Soviets vs. neo-liberals. It was a melting pot of voices, allowed by the organizing skills and the propagandistic interests of the ‘intercultural’ producer Roman Abramovich. Together, they symbolised in a nut-shell the challenges of contemporary British identity: its openness to cultural and economic influence, its occasionally defensive attitude over traditional forms of identity, its desire to build bridges while at the same time fearing their ultimate implications. There seemed to be a latent and growing necessity to dialogue, to include as part of the critical community –and, by extension, the general social identity– ‘minority’ cultural voices such as that of the émigrés and the ‘foreigners’, who altered the social skin of a country where “issues of power (...), responsibility [and] cultural hegemony” were increasingly relative (Bennett, 1997: 201). Perhaps the sublimated qualities of Charlotta’s performance –to give an example– pointed to an enlightened possibility, that of the respect of diversity through the acceptance of a shared tapestry of human emotions. But the process to reach this ideal, as the fall of the orchard indicated, was never exempt of sacrifices.

3. Neo-colonialism and dictatorship: Daniel Veronese Company’s *Uncle Vanya* and *Spying on a Woman Killing Herself* (18 – 23 May 2010)

Daniel Veronese Company’s *Uncle Vanya*, presented during May 2010, entered the British dramatic landscape through a different method from the Sovremennik’s *Cherry Orchard*. In sharp contrast to the Russian troupe’s season, introduced as a stand-alone event in the middle of London, this Argentinian show was brought as part of the 2010 Brighton Festival. As it will be seen, this reflected the irreverent and experimental nature of the work: something connected to the story of a town “with a reputation for being radical”, full of unconventional events and progressive policies (Mead,

2006). Indeed, since being selected by the future king George IV as his favourite place of leisure, leading to the “building of his seaside residence on the Old Steine (...) now known as the Royal Pavillion”, Brighthelmstone –as it was originally known– became a place where the country’s bohemians reunited to enjoy some warm weather and a variety of entertainments; possessor of a strong artistic community, and as a harbour of left-wing political postures and non-religious institutions (the “first Labour MP in Essex” being elected there), after the sexual liberation of the 1960s and 1970s it became recognised as the ‘gay capital of the UK’ and as a community where trends that might have been seen as too avant-garde or morally reprehensible in other parts of the country were tolerantly accepted (Mead, 2006).

Capitalizing on this rebellious history, the May Festival was created in 1967, during a transitional period of British history when the Empire and the Commonwealth continued their fragmentation (Barbados, Botswana, Guyana and Lesotho becoming independent the year before) and new notions of nation were built around cultural icons like The Beatles, the sexual revolution or the ‘swinging’ generation. As the impresario and first Artistic Director Ian Hunter would write a year later in the programme of the 1968 Festival, “the aim of the Brighton Festival is to stimulate townsfolk and visitors into taking a new look at the arts and to give them the opportunity to assess developments in the field of culture where the serious and the apparently flippant ride side by side” (Brighton Festival, 2012). With this aim in mind, supported by the contacts obtained by Hunter during the successful 1965 Commonwealth Festival and with the backing of theatrical figures such as Laurence Olivier (a Brighton resident), the festival quickly expanded and became a complex organisation that went beyond theatre and presented –and sometimes even promoted the combination of– art, music and dance.⁹¹ By 2006, according to the chair of the organisation Polly

⁹¹ Important theatrical shows over the years were the Japanese No theatre company in 1970 or Cheek by Jowl in 1994 (Brighton Festival, 2012).

Toynbee, it had become “England's biggest arts festival (second in Britain only to Edinburgh)”, with “half a million people [going] to see performances” (Toynbee, 2006). From 2009, in order to win more local and international recognition, the Festival created the position of Guest Artistic Director, first given to Anish Kapoor and then to Vanessa Redgrave (2012), Aung San Suu Kyi (2011) and –in the year of Veronese’s production– Brian Eno. With this move, that mixed artists and human right defenders, the Festival aimed to position itself as an ‘edgy’ and ‘alternative’ event that accepted both consecrated and new-coming artists.

A more detailed exploration of the politics behind this organisation, however, reveals some complexities that partly dispute its ‘outré’ quality, and position it as part of a bigger capitalist enterprise that mixes the “social benefits of the arts and culture, their economic impact [and] the evaluation of their cultural policy” (Towse, 2010: 513). Regarding its inception, it must be said that, even though it appeared at a time when Brighton tolerated queer lifestyles that were not accepted in other places of the UK, the festival itself was never as artistically experimental as later events such as the London International Mime Festival; despite the occasional presence of ground-breaking shows, it always possessed a more popular and commercial nature, which is understandable when taking into consideration that its first artistic director collaborated in the structuring of the Edinburgh Festival (assisting theatre impresario Rudolf Bing in its very first year and later on becoming its artistic director between 1951 and 1955), and that he participated in the creation of the Bath Festival (1948-1968), the City of London Festival (1962-1980) and Commonwealth Arts Festival of 1965.⁹² This reveals, first of all, the value of festivals as points of communication, exposing

⁹² The politics behind this last event should not go unrecognised: as many politicians were doing at the same time, it attempted to recapture a unified notion of nation and communal identity during changing socio-political times. Like the 1951 Festival of Britain but on a bigger scale, the Commonwealth Festival –beyond its aesthetic achievements– was a propagandistic move that renovated notions of sovereignty in a decisively post-colonial world, by reinforcing the ties of alliance among those semi-independent former colonies through a pretended coexistence of cultural values. It’s not surprising then that, among other interesting intercultural

audiences to different artistic traditions in a space for “*rapprochement* between cultural areas or contexts” that supports the “investigation of common elements” between them (Pavis, 1996: 10). The fact that so many of them were created during the first two decades after World War II, when the UK was recovering an internal stability, adds an extra value: they served not only to connect with ‘foreign’ forces but also to renew bonds among local communities.

Another, and much more pragmatic, element connected to these annual events is that they offer artistic commodities that, “under globalisation (...), are driven by principles of the neo-liberal capitalist market” and therefore are at the disposition of audiences-customers at a varied range of prices (Harvie, 2005: 76). The selection of artists and performers responds not only to a desire of showing new aesthetic perspectives but also to the producer’s necessity to obtain economic success by offering what they believe is more attractive to audiences, after a long deliberation process filled with internal agendas and interests. The presence of edgier works at the Brighton Festival in the second half of the 1960s, then, did not necessarily answer a desire to go ‘against the grain’ and defend a generational revolt; it was a clever commercial move by founder Ian Hunter, who, following his idea of festivals as the “core around which each town should weave its own attractions” (*Daily Telegraph*, 2003), recognised the progressive traits of the village and capitalised on its local interests. This was just a first step, though: as the creator of a network of Festivals in different parts of the country, he also projected these local identities on a national and international scale, aiming to “promote an image” of the city and to attract “tourists who spend money not just on entry tickets for attending festival events but also on food, accommodation, and so on” (Towse, 2010: 520). More than sixty years later, the prolonged success of the Festival ultimately testified to the success of these endeavours.

events, the Festival brought together for the first time the musical skills of Yehudi Menuhin and Ravi Shankar (Calder, 2003). Abramovich’s use of culture as a political spearhead was not a new concoction...

Likewise, after some time each of these festivals acquired a personality of its own, reaching new levels of organisational complexity and sharing the theatrical space with other ventures that attracted local and foreign audiences. The economic agendas behind them, however, were if anything empowered: in the case of the Brighton Festival, this can be seen for example in the 2006 split –started in 2003 by operations manager Holly Payton and then artistic director Christopher Barron– between the ‘official’ event, whose shows were preselected by the board of members and the Guest Artistic Director, and the ‘Fringe’ Festival, an “open-access festival” where “anyone can put on an event and be included in the festival programme on payment of a fee”, generating a bigger number of participants –and of commercial competitors (Brighton Fringe, n.d.). This decision, inspired by comparable cases such as the Edinburgh Festival, gave “organisers greater control over finances and programming” and allowed Brighton Festival “to become a [fully] programmed festival” (Mira, 2006); in so doing, though, the Festival severed links with local companies, semi-professional groups and experimental troupes that –in their flexibility and variety– reflected the subtle changes in the notions of national identity. Even the decision to create the Guest Artistic Director position reflected the economic needs of the market: by changing it every year and using figures of international reputation rather than experienced managers, while retaining a strong administrative core that allowed economic continuity, it gave the Festival certain renovation and a healthy amount of press coverage.⁹³ Together with the presence of press releases, vouchers, and e-mail communications, this technique created a temporary “creative clustering” which offered

⁹³ Aung San Suu Kyim, 2011’s Guest Artistic Director, did not even travel to Brighton: forced to stay in his country due to a traveling ban imposed by the Burmese government, she only participated via “a short video message (...) recorded in secret with much difficulty” (Todd, 2011). To a certain point, this could be seen as an attempt to bring awareness to the excesses of the country’s dictatorship; however, considering how the social activist was connected to a widespread promotion of the Festival in different media, it could also be considered as a savvy PR strategy to increase economic results.

beneficial “strong agglomeration economies” for the city, merging local and ‘foreign’ forces in a multicultural market of performers and audiences (Towse, 2010: 517).

The producers’ selection of Chekhov –and Veronese’s interpretation of one of his plays– for the 2010 Brighton Festival responded then to a series of economic and aesthetic interests. First of all, it must be recalled that in the same year the theatrical community celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Russian author’s birth: a commemoration cherished not only for its sentimental values but also because of the profitability it promised. Considering his degree of assimilation and reinterpretation in the UK, and added to the parallel celebrations of other theatrical organisations like the BBC⁹⁴, it is economically understandable that the organisers decided to present two shows connected to him: Veronese’s *Uncle Vanya* and “dreamthinkspeak’s promenade-style reimagining of *The Cherry Orchard*” *Before I sleep* (Jeffries, 2010). The fact that both of them (as the present and fourth chapter of this work indicate) were decisively experimental could be connected, at first sight, to the influence of that year’s Guest Artistic Director Brian Eno: someone presented by Steve Jeffries of *The Guardian* as “one of the most consistently diverting creative presences in Britain”, who in his pop-rock recordings of the 1970s, his production of records for David Bowie, his ground-breaking experimentations in the field of ambient music, and his collaborations with artists and dramatists, always showed an acute interest in new technologies and “alternative visions of how art is made, how it works, and why we need it” (Jeffries, 2010). Seemingly supporting this theory there were other shows presented that year, which suggested a progressive view very much in tune with the creator of *Here comes the Warm Jets*: Cheek by Jowl’s *Macbeth*, *I Malvolio*, a reimagining of *Twelfth Night* by Tim Crouch; *Tales of the Afterlives*, a “theatrical collaboration [between Eno and] novelist

⁹⁴ This commemoration reveals the extent of the influence that Chekhov had in the country: over 15 different broadcasts were part of a comprehensive radio season during January 2010, including “a range of documentary and drama as well as short-stories and essays” presented in BBC Radio 3, 4 and 7 (BBC, 2010).

David Eagleman, asking what happens after death” (Smith 2010a); and the avant-garde German group Rimini Protokoll’s *Best Before*, a mixture of theatre and an interactive video game.

Parallel to this, however, there must be considered Eno’s self-mythologizing qualities as a 21st century polymath: someone who presented himself as “a fucking hippie” while at the same time spending a couple of hours threatening a journalist “with violence, teach[ing him] about shipbuilding, chat[ting] about surfing, and explain[ing] why religion is similar to sex and drugs” (Jeffries, 2010). Also, it cannot be denied that a substantial part of his career unfolded within the world of mainstream pop-rock, through (for example) well-paid collaborations with bands such as U2 and Coldplay; on him, as in the Festival itself, existed a clear mixture of experimentation with a commercialised artistic taste.⁹⁵ If one adds to this picture the announcement by Andrew Comben, chief executive of Brighton Dome and Festival Ltd., who when presenting the line-up indicated that “a number of the commissions that we put in place a year to 18 months ago are just coming to fruition now” (quoted by Smith, 2010), a more realistic picture of the event appeared: one where Eno played a very important role⁹⁶, but that was limited by a long-term organisation that existed beyond his temporary position, and that had started even before his predecessor Anish Kapoor was in charge of the Festival. Ultimately, his participation was subjugated to a development dictated by economically-conscious directives; to understand the influence of a foreign discourse in the national discourses within these tightly controlled agendas, it is necessary then to consider the presentation of shows like Veronese’s *Uncle Vanya* (and its companion piece *Women Dreamt Horses*) not as mere aesthetic decisions made by a provisional organiser, but as calculated economic choices within a globalised market where “objects, people, cultures, ideas, information, and capital move great

⁹⁵ This economic interest might explain the presence in the 2010’s line-up of the distinctly non-cutting edge rock musical *Marine Parade*, set in a Brighton bed and breakfast.

⁹⁶ Eno “personally curated shows, appeared onstage in several and even threw in a last-minute addition to the art programme after kick-off” (Todd, 2011).

distances very rapidly – even instantaneously (...), producing extra opportunities (...) for widespread democratic participation in culture”, but which also face the challenges of “commodification, commercialisation, and homogenisation” (Harvie, 2005: 75).

These intricacies were suggested, initially, in the way the product was presented to audiences. In the Festival website, *Uncle Vanya* was displayed as a “contemporary reworking” that with “minimalist stage aesthetic and taut emotional intensity (...) cuts straight to the heart of (...) universal Chekhovian truths” (Brighton Festival, 2010): a brief and vague description that nevertheless revealed the producer’s interest to attract both traditional spectators interested in the ‘classic’ Chekhov and those fascinated by brisker, experimental approaches. A previous definition of the show by its director Daniel Veronese offered a more complete analysis: “there will not be theatrical costumes or bucolic rhythms in family rooms. Nor furniture that denotes a picnic time. (...) [The play] just presents some topics of universal order: alcohol, love for nature, crude animals and the quest for truth through art. God, Stanislavski and Genet” (Veronese, 2006). Had this view been more actively promoted, the spectators married to the nostalgic interpretation of Chekhov might have not attended the show; its absence in the promotional material kept instead under wraps some of the challenging aspects of the production, specifically its mixture of psychological realism, surrealism, metaphysics and “a large dose of meta-theatricality, along with chunks of text from *The Seagull* and (...) Jean Genet’s *The Maids*” (Smith, 2010b). It was a decision that from an economic point of view made perfect sense: while promoting the name of the director and his troupe, which attracted informed theatre-goers interested in experimental theatre, the organisers expected that the “predetermined brand identity” (Harvie, 2005: 87) carried by the assimilated Chekhov could draw also traditional audiences. Naturally, on the day of the performance all the elements mentioned above might have become obvious; but by then spectators had already fulfilled their “willingness to pay” and bought their tickets, showing their “strong preference for the

particular good” that was the show (Towse, 2010: 144).⁹⁷ The economic stratagem to attract as many different audiences as possible, from the progressive to the ‘foreign’ to the casual theatregoer, had by then fulfilled its role.⁹⁸

The director strengthened, although in a slightly different way, the economic potentialities of the play. He was, after all, far from being a newcomer to the theatrical arena: through a mixture of artistic compromise and media self-promotion, by the time of his arrival to the Brighton Festival he was already known as “arguably Argentina’s most successful theatre artist” (Graham Jones, 2010: 12). Born in Buenos Aires in 1955 in a family of carpenters, and after studying direction with Mauricio Kartun and puppetry with Ariel Bufano, he began his professional dramatic career at the age of 28 working as mime and puppeteer: two artistic professions that could bypass more easily the strong censorship of the successive dictatorships that controlled the country during the ‘Revolución Argentina’ of 1966-1973, and the National Reorganisation Process of 1976-1983. After the arrival of the New Democracy and during the democratically-elected government of Raúl Alfonsín, Veronese –who had already started to explore the possibilities offered by object theatre, re-contextualizing everyday items for the creation of characters and theatrical environments– co-founded in 1989 the company ‘Periférico de Objetos’ (Objects’ Periphery), with the intention to “escape from pre-established codes in a discipline [puppetry] almost always intended for children’s theatre” and offer instead shows for adults (Veronese, 1999-2000). Productions based on Alfred Jarry (*Ubu Roi*) and E.T.A. Hoffman (*The Sandman*) followed; their common trend was a deconstruction of theatrical elements, in which “words were separated from image and puppets

⁹⁷ Also, because of the short week-long run of the production, there was not much risk of losing audiences afterwards due to word of mouth opinions or negative critical reviews.

⁹⁸ Since the arrival of the railway in 1841, Brighton had a direct contact to London and other important cultural hotspots of the country; even today it is common to see many Brighton residents who commute every day to their works in the capital. The press articles and analysis of the national media, then, must be read as propagandistic attempts to attract audiences that could complement the restricted number of spectators from Brighton itself.

from puppeteers, who in turn split themselves into manipulators and actors” (Graham-Jones, 2012: 204), and a sinister tone that fitted the political spirit of a generation that was facing, with the return of democracy and the arrival of the 1990s Menemist decade, complex issues regarding historical memory, oblivion and reconciliation.

In 1995, the group had a critical and international success with their “brilliantly violent version” of Heinrich Müller’s *Hamletmachine*, which shattered “the magic of the seemingly independent marionette and its invisible puppeteer” (Graham-Jones, 2010: 14); it was a capital moment that not only showed to Argentinian audiences the darker possibilities of a genre usually connected to lighter concoctions, but also led its director to the universe of ‘real-life’ actors and stagings. His particular style positioned him first as an underground creator, and later as an established –if controversial– national icon; with an established troupe of actors, he toured Asia and Europe and presented a repertoire that spanned classical pieces, contemporary performances and personal creations; in the field of writing, his published dramas and essays grew until covering two lengthy volumes. All together, these elements pointed towards a postmodern approach to drama, filled with a dark sense of humour, physical frenzy and meta-theatrical references; a style that “multiplies, contradicts and, perhaps more importantly, incommodes” (Graham-Jones, 2010: 14), and which went against the lineal plots and psychological characterizations of the ‘well-made play’ still defended by some quarters of British dramaturgy.⁹⁹ When applied to Chekhov, as it will be seen below, this generated an interpretation that went beyond the nostalgic undertones proposed by many other past productions.

From a European, and more specifically from a British festival’s perspective, this differentiation also proved to be particularly attractive: the origin of the director was satisfactorily ‘exotic’, helping the

⁹⁹ For more information on his life and works, please refer to <http://www.autores.org.ar/dveronese/> (in Spanish).

coordinators to exalt his 'international' status and to remark the relevance of artistic communication over political tensions, such as the one presented only three months before the beginning of the Festival, when the Falklands' Island conflict was reignited due to the Argentinian government's opposition to the "imminent arrival of a British oil exploration rig" (Valente, 2010).¹⁰⁰ At the same time, the troupe came from one of the most 'Europeanized' countries of South America, mostly because of its continued acceptance of immigrants from the Old Continent (Veronese himself being of Italian ancestry): their interpretation of Chekhov promised to have an intercultural quality that made it attractive and challenging in equal measures to British audiences.¹⁰¹ This was enhanced by the fact that *Uncle Vanya* was part of one of Veronese's more globally recognised efforts, appropriately entitled *Proyecto Chéjov (Chekhov's Project)*: a long-term series of stagings inspired by the work of the Russian author, that tried to mix his canonical global recognition with the idiosyncrasies and interests of the Argentinian director. In her article about the venture, Jean Graham-Jones described it as the creation of "radical versions" of the Russian four full-length late dramas, which "overlap in venue, casting, design aesthetics, and performance styles" and that "taken together (...) offer a meditation on life in and as theatre" (Graham-Jones, 2012: 203). *Uncle Vanya*, subtitled *Espía una mujer que se mata (...Spies on a Woman Killing Herself)*, was presented in 2006 and was the second in the series, after the 2004 *Un hombre que se ahoga (A Drowning Man)*, a distillation of "*Three Sisters* to under ninety minutes [that inverted] gender roles" (Graham-Jones, 2012: 203). As it can be seen already from their titles, there was a strong connection between the two shows regarding thematic cores such as the battle of the sexes, the political evolution of

¹⁰⁰ For more details, please refer to <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1251901/Falkland-Islands-oil-row-Argentina-warns-UK-complacency.html>

¹⁰¹ That does not mean that the show really had that accessibility; quite the opposite, when taking into consideration Veronese's career it is inevitable to realize that his style never aimed to be completely straightforward. As it happened in the case of the Sovremennik's production, then, these presumed connections were economic tricks subtly emphasised by producers to attract as many spectators as possible.

Argentina and its aesthetic-social position in the international arena. Inside *Uncle Vanya* itself there were extra associations, including the abovementioned interpolation of passages from *The Seagull* and Genet's *The Maids*: a palimpsest that clashed aesthetic trends and political visions, "stripped to the most elemental of human interactions with thoughtfully constructed environments and actors bringing everything they have got to the onstage encounter" (Graham-Jones, 2010: 16). From a British perspective, this proposed to complement not only the most established views of the Russian writer, but also the local notion of national identity.

A first element to consider is the venue of the show: accommodated in Brighton's venue Corn Exchange, the production was presented between 16 and 23 May 2010, where it received a reduced (yet incisive) critical coverage. This lack of reviews is understandable given the variety of events presented at the same time, and also a proof of the challenges it generated among spectators, starting with the language barrier: something that came as a surprise for some reviewers, despite the origin of the show. "Due presumably to an oversight, the Brighton Festival brochure does not mention that (...) *Uncle Vanya* is performed (...) with English surtitles", wrote Michael Hootman from the LGBT magazine *GScene* (distributed mainly for the Brighton & Hove community). "Nothing intrinsically wrong with this, but (...) the play (...) has huge swathes in which a number of characters talk at once, and it takes all your concentration just to work out who's saying what" (Hootman, 2010). This omission pointed, first, to the already mentioned commercial need to keep under wraps certain elements of the production in order to attract customers interested in Chekhov and *Uncle Vanya*; second, it suggested an expectation on the part of British audiences to receive a product in their language, even within the context of a multicultural theatre festival. The power of the English language, although played down by a more understanding tone, was suggested once more; the fact that the show was presented within a venue in a cultural complex "originally built in 1805 as the Prince Regent's riding house" (Brighton Dome, n.d.) could be seen in this context as a subtle

reinforcement of the expectations shared by some of the most traditional spectators. In any case, the lack of information created from the beginning some communicative challenges, where “native speakers of the target language”, English, were forced to depend on a “target text” provided on the upper part of the stage to establish associations with the actions, the actors and –if they had seen another production or read the original in Russian or in translation– their own recollections of the original play (Griesel, 2005: 67). As in *Sovremennik*’s case, there was an immediate alienation between the stage and those spectators who did not know Spanish; the effect was deliberately enhanced by the aesthetic choices taken by Veronese, cutting and reorganizing the original texts, and imposing “an intensity of emotion and physicality” (Graham-Jones, 2012: 209) in the acting style where characters’ psychological motivations ran parallel to an exploration of intellectual motifs.¹⁰² From the first uttered word, Veronese turned the staging into a reflection on the processes of translation and communication: an element that was already present in the Spanish text with its “long speeches reduced or broken up through dialogue (...), solitary monologues (...) [that] were interrupted by others”, and surreal inclusions of fragments of other plays (Graham-Jones, 2012: 208), but that in the context of a British festival acquired further layers of signification, referring to a global context of contact and incomprehension among cultures. Following this idea, and applying it to contemporary societies like the UK, each character seemed to represent an alienated community; their desperate and occasionally bleakly funny attempts to create proper exchanges reflected the ambiguities of social barter, fortified by true comradeship or marked by superiority and oppression. The image of the entrapped figures on the stage, playing an experimental play in

¹⁰² This performance style was no doubt indebted to the director’s past experience as a puppeteer: through a series of simplified actions and over-emphasised attitudes, the actors seemed to become marionettes controlled by the hands of an experienced master.

front of a foreign audience unaware of many of their dramatic codes, became a powerful memento of the difficulties of social communication.

The dialogues' structure and elocution was another element that offered interesting connotations. Cutting expository dialogues or conventional introductions, the play started with a discussion "between Sonia and her father, Serebryakov (...) about the state of contemporary theatre" (Graham-Jones, 2010: 207) and evolved into a quick, overlapping cascade of dialogues. Even for Spanish speakers it was difficult to fully understand the meanings behind all the interjections, puns, rhythmic changes and partly poetic, partly slang-based expressions; the psychological signification was displaced by a game of associations and patterns of sound that, influenced by Joyce's stream of consciousness and a Beckettian estrangement of language, explored the textures and musical flow of language while at the same time starting a "process of destabilization (...), thwarting the rules of conversational co-operation" and underlining its deficiencies at embracing the complexity of human emotions (Aston & Savona, 1991: 67). It never went as far as *Finnegan's Wake* or *Play*: although simplified in comparison to Chekhov's original¹⁰³, the plot was recognisable and the characters still had many of the traits given to them by the Russian author. But by avoiding the use of early twentieth-century Russian dresses or a careful vocalization of foreign surnames and patronymics, the show accepted its fictional and theatrical condition, embracing imperfection and the impossibility of absolute knowledge of reality through language: a view that not only went against some traditional views of British theatre but of British identity as well, more specifically what Anthony Easthope defined as an "empiricist tradition" where "reality is thought of as simply autonomous" and understandable if observed "'objectively', that is, without prejudgment or self-deception", using only "concrete judgements and particular analysis" (Easthope, 1999: 88-89). This,

¹⁰³ For example, Teleguin, the impoverished landowner, was mixed with the old nanny Marina into a unique "androgynous hybrid" (Braude, 2007).

in terms of language, implied the possibility of the word as a carrier of established, monolithic tokens of meaning: a possibility shattered by Veronese (like other contemporary creators) with its deliberate ambiguity and emotional density, which recognised the multivalent and sometimes equivocal depths of language.

This aesthetic decision also spotlighted the multi-layered complexities of staging a classical play in a different language and society; it presented the play as an openly intercultural artefact, preserving but evolving Chekhov's original structure where all the characters had contrasting episodes of activity, silence, pathos and emotional release, and using it "to negotiate across barriers – language, cultural, spiritual, racial and physical" that ultimately created "hybrid spaces" (Smith, 1991: 4).¹⁰⁴ A powerful discourse was created, connected with the late theatrical works of Beckett in its recognition of the limitations of language, its use of pauses and humour to create an existential effect, its thematic interest in the politics of domination and control through dialogue, and its open theatricality that broke any possible realism on the stage: almost playing the role of a double mirror, it reflected and merged national and global confrontations. From an Argentinian perspective, the fierce and violent exchanges recalled the dark eras of dictatorship, with their brutal interrogations and dread of unfounded accusations; from a British view, considering the ambivalent relationship between the two countries after the neo-colonial 1982 Falklands War, the chaos and violence presented (and remembered) on the stage could be read as representations of the desecrating powers of colonialism. Just like the Empire imposed before its own mythologies and visions through the teaching of English as the dominating language, creating a limited link between the mind and the world, now a former Spanish colony –turned into a democratic space with its own worldviews– presented to audiences its own intertheatrical interpretation of an assimilated work "ghosted" by

¹⁰⁴ This can be connected too to the in-between hybridisation described by Homi Bhabha, whose main ideas were presented in the introduction of this work.

previous stagings and readings, subjecting it to “adjustment and modification” according to “the new circumstances and contexts” (Carlson, 2001: 2) of the multifaceted space of the Spanish language. Considered in the context of a contested evolution of national identity, where some quarters defended an unchangeable view of the ‘true’ pillars of the country, this ambiguity underlined the fluidity of cultural identities, which due to globalisation and modern communication devices broke the political constraints of ‘nation’ and shifted into a clashing mixture of discourses and perspectives. By using a play frequently presented on the British stage and then twisting it to offer new intellectual and emotional connections, Veronese proposed what Keri E. Iyall Smith (2008: 3) described as “a reflexive relationship between the local and global”, where “the local influenced the global and the global influenced the local, [while] the local is universalized and the universal is localised”, therefore shifting established local perspectives of both Chekhov and the British nation.

Another show written by Veronese, also presented at the 2010 Brighton Festival and presented parallel to *Uncle Vanya*, expanded this reading: *Women Dreamt Horses*.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, inspired by Chekhov’s writing style and the political unrest of his own society, the director had previously written and premiered an ‘imagined prequel’ to the Russian piece, moving some characters to an Argentinian background and loosely exploring what could have happened to them before the re-contextualised events of *...Spies on Woman Killing Herself*. The result explored an undetermined period where –again– the shadows of coercion and social alienation affected the most intimate moments of life and created a destructive atmosphere, as expressed in the context of “a family dinner derailed by what appears to be deeply ingrained violence” (Graham-Jones, 2012: 210). The title referred to a particularly gripping moment, when a character named Lucera remembered the death of a pony in a seemingly banal incident: an extended monologue that hinted at the corruption

¹⁰⁵ Although created at different times and presented (with one exception) on different days, both works shared the stage and the decors of the other production, as well as some ideas and political perspectives.

of childish fantasies by the iron-heaviness of reality and the destruction of emancipatory values (the horse being a symbol of freedom). Added to other painful scenes, where various “family members” tried “to destroy one another”, the whole play seemed a prolonged “ceremony of self-destruction” (Graham-Jones, 2012: 212) that, when connected to Chekhov’s drama, suggested a darker twist to its characters’ pre-revolutionary disappointments.

Pushing Chekhov’s concerns for individual inactivity and political instability into expressionistic extremes, the suffering of every figure in *Women Dreamt Horses* was caused both by personal stupor and the machinations of a regime that crushed any possible dissent: a nightmarish political view that, considering the socio-political relationship between the UK and Argentina, and due to the universalizing ambiguity deliberately proposed by Veronese, did not only focus on the legacy of the Argentinian junta, but also served as a metaphorical indictment of the worst dictatorial tendencies of any country’s national project. On the one side, the contradicting recollections of the characters –which led them to many rhetorical fights focused in the upholding of their ‘truth’ over the rest– dynamited the Komisarjevsky-esque notion of Chekhovian memory as a bucolic space useful for the reinforcement of ‘golden’ imperial values, exposing instead a universe of deceitfulness and self-destructive guilt. Building on the “expectations” and the “residue of memories of previous experiences” carried by audiences (Carlson, 2001: 5), the director haunted the stage with subtle references to the Russian author –an identical gun used in both productions, the presence of three brothers as opposed to three sisters– and used them to reveal processes of acceptance, denial or indifference to the colonial past.¹⁰⁶ On the other side, the hopeless tone and darkly ironic treatment

¹⁰⁶ This particular production was not directed by Veronese himself but by Jay Scheib, an American theatre director who had already directed an English translation of the play in 2006 in New York as part of Buenos Aires in Translation (BaIT), “an authentic international theatrical collaboration” which brought together “four of the most dynamic playwrights from Buenos Aires” and paired them “with four similarly cutting-edge and innovative N.Y.-based directors and theatre companies to result in entirely new productions (Kaplow-Goldman, 2006: 1). The 2010 production, however, preserved the original text in Spanish and used the same

of the whole story, where the complete incapacity to accept social difference and historic transformation led to a “destructive violence” that permeated “brothers, couples, families, animals, the environment, even art” (Graham Jones, 2012: 211), suggested a criticism of the potential rising of extremist political views, and (something more relevant for Britain) a sarcastic attack on any society’s exaltation of individualistic and selfish discourses, which could lead to private and social breakdowns.

These harrowing political contexts became then the poetic background of the *Uncle Vanya* show: when the characters attacked each other, especially when pronouncing the texts written by Chekhov, there was an implied sadness in their relationships that resounded more deeply to those aware of the previous events. Once more, the burden of the past and the despair of the future became symbols of the challenges faced by ever-changing and growing contemporary societies.¹⁰⁷ “Despite hailing from South America, it’s all very European”, declared Alistair Smith in his review (2010b), revealing the ways into which this grittiness connected with local audiences: an idea no doubt enhanced by the referred use of literal quotations from external dramas, all of them connected to the European theatrical tradition. Chekhov’s 1896 *Seagull* was used: Serebryakov recited extracts from Trigorin’s conversations with Nina, drawing Elena’s (and the audiences’)

set and actors of Veronese’s *Uncle Vanya*; these connections created strong thematic and aesthetic links between both shows that revealed the close collaboration between Veronese and Scheib, and reinforced the intercultural and international values of the entire endeavour.

¹⁰⁷ The despair continued in a third production, not presented in Brighton but connected to the other two works. After *Women Dreamt Horses*, and before *Uncle Vanya*, Veronese initiated his ‘Project Chekhov’ with the already mentioned ‘free version’ of *Three Sisters*, changing –as said above– the gender of all characters and re-titling it *Un hombre que se ahoga* (*A Drowning Man*). Complemented by the optional title of the *Vanya* production –...*Spies on a Woman Killing Herself*–, both sentences complemented each other, framing both productions within the same ironic space: through the inversion and mixture of the expected genders (masculine for a piece dominated by women and vice versa), Veronese analysed “gender and class politics” (Graham Jones, 2010: 18) as spaces of emotional encounter, and reinforced a view of the Chekhovian universe where all “characters swerve around the truth as they proceed with their low function lives, wriggling across each other with the pettiness and hypocrisy of it all” (Young, 2010) and ignoring, through jokes and improbable expectations, their Dantesque emotional entrapments. Influenced by the Russian satirical tradition, these attitudes were taken into grotesque extremes; by confounding their gender –one of the few stable elements the original characters had– powerlessness and inescapability were accentuated.

attention to the connections between the unhappy women of Chekhov's plays, while obliquely criticising the melodramatic types of "innocent or scheming, or more provocatively virgin wronged or witch triumphant" and offering multi-faceted characters with their "evasive strategies (...), sense of responsibility" (Marsh, 2010: 23), resilience and (tragic) hope in the face of failure. Also, as it was implied before by Veronese, a link was established with Jean Genet's work and his post-war exploration of French idiosyncrasies: at the centre of the 90-minutes-long play, Vanya and Astrov – competitors for Elena's love – performed a fragment of the seminal play *The Maids* (1947). A brief gender inversion increased "the element of sham, illusion and deception", and comically reinforced several psychological traits of the characters, like their friendship and mutual incomprehension of the female psyche; on a darker level, Veronese asserted the "individual power confrontations" (Plunka, 1992: 1976) of their relationship and, by extension, the secret violence of all attempts at human communication, including political ones between different societies. This is not surprising considering the influence of Genet's ritualistic style: its inter- and meta-theatrical appearance (with the actors using the play-within-the-play to underline the theatricality of the piece) was not a mere aesthetic caprice but a decision that showed the interpretative possibilities of connecting two different yet complementary social contexts – a message relevant in the British context of immigration waves and intercultural challenges. It did not matter if a character was middle-class, part of a pre-revolutionary rural *intelligentsia* or a working class member in a post-war metropolis: at the end, the production suggested, all of them were menaced by an "inability to alter their social or economic status" (Plunka, 1992: 177) and a feeling of entrapment within the constraints of their own social class, which could only be broken through a difficult –yet rewarding– process of communication where drama had an important position. The importance of Chekhovian dramaturgy not as a preserver of imperial discourses but as an analyst of communal maladies and harbinger of disenchanted aesthetic tendencies (such as Beckettian nightmarish environments) was

consequently underlined; and his plea for a rational comprehension of these evils and a more plural understanding of identity on and off the stage energetically portrayed.

Other linguistic and anachronistic elements underlined the theatricality (and the socio-critical qualities) of the piece: openly recognising its value “as an object of questioning, the working of codes” (Pavis, 1992: 60), it plunged into the world of inter-textual and meta-theatrical associations. Literary discourses from different historical periods, absent in Chekhov’s version, were introduced: Serebryakov, a retired university professor, was turned into a theatrical researcher, and his interventions became platforms for “a meditation on the stage” and its dramatic innovations, using ideas of members of the 19th century Russian intelligentsia (Graham-Jones, 2012: 208). A particularly interesting moment came during a debate with his daughter Sonya: through a self-satisfied monologue, the character expressed his affection for classical traditions, represented in the plays of Alexandr Ostrovsky, and a general disdain for ‘modern’ experimentations like those of Konstantin Stanislavsky. Besides the obvious comedic tone –with a quasi-Pirandellian character criticizing the director in charge of the first performance of the play he was part of– the sequence resonated in its presentation of the disjunction between tradition and modernity, which from a British perspective criticised once more traditional notions of Chekhovian dramaturgy (and, indirectly, of national identity) connected to a preservation of well-established habits where “language, not interposing significantly between object and subject, text and reader, is essentially transparent (or can be)” (Easthope, 1999: 120). Instead, Veronese proposed a coexistence of different significations, presenting them as parts of an ever-evolving aesthetic-political search. From this point of view, Ostrovsky’s pieces were mentioned not only as bridges with Pushkin and Gogol’s Romanticism, but also as influences on the ‘naturalistic’ and socially-committed work of Chekhov; meanwhile, the Stanislavskian ‘revolution’ was confronted by a century of newer styles and turned into another example of ‘classical’ traditions. Mockery served Veronese to deny the idea of aesthetic progress or

superiority, and to propose an interaction where all discourses became equally valuable: a reflection heralded by Chekhov himself in the lengthy conversations of his artists in *The Seagull*, and that in the context of Brighton's arts festival underscored a comment on the inequalities of distribution of cultural goods, where few developed countries (the UK, the US, Germany, France and Japan) received more than half of all the creative commodities exchanged in the world (Towse, 2010: 48). Against neo-imperial impositions of meaning, Veronese proposed instead respect for different cultures and aesthetics.

The performances and architectural design of the show continued the deconstruction of established and 'classic' Chekhovian paradigms. As in the *Sovremennik* show, although aiming at a different goal, the actors played their roles with a brutish and fearless intensity. The failed murder attempted by Vanya in the third act was played with a mixture of extreme laughter and pathos that, through Osmar Núñez's charisma, served to highlight the "sense of Vanya's displacement from the centrality of life", his "lack of self" that led to disillusion" (Marsh, 2010: 19). The rest of the cast mixed an understanding of the intellectual obsessions of the director with an expressionistic brutality that filled the stage: an acting style that, from a British perspective, de-assimilated the Russian author and highlighted the non-compromising political and social aspects of his work. This was accentuated by the décor, two simple and worn-out white walls with two doors and "a small serving hatch at the back of the stage", which created "an acute feeling of claustrophobia and a degree of voyeurism" (Smith, 2010b) that trapped the characters in an Sartrean chamber of hell. It was not strange to hear the last monologue, recited by Sonya, pronounced in a fast, monotone and emotionally flat fashion: all ideas for a better future seemed at odds with this decayed space, reminiscent of a prison or a dilapidated rented flat, and whose simplicity accentuated the abstract and polyvalent qualities of the entire staging. "Among the aseptic and reliefless surface that surrounds us, Chekhovian subtext works more effectively than ever. We do not know what it refers to, what kind of meanings it hides",

said an Argentinian review of the show; “unsurprisingly”, it added, “the work ends with Vanya and his niece’s head banging on a table” (Mauro, 2006). This action, in its briskness and artificiality, recalled two marionettes whose strings had suddenly been left loose; Veronese, the puppeteer, closed his show not only suggesting his characters’ frustrations and self-punishments, but also a crushing socio-political force that left individuals incapable to communicate or to establish genuine exchanges. Among many of the possible implications, this could be read as a warning signal: if citizens did not actively try to create links with other worldviews and preferred to live in an hierarchised universe, they should expect their lives to be controlled by highly limited (and disempowering) discourses.

In short, Veronese’s staging was a departure from the most traditional, nostalgic views of Chekhov in the UK: presented in a central venue in Brighton, it could be seen as a celebration of intercultural possibilities in the middle of a festival partly subsidized by Arts Council England through their National portfolio organisation funding, “receiving 1,071,506 pounds in 2009/2010” (Arts Council England, 2010: 30). To understand its ultimate influence, however, it is important to reconsider the economic and pragmatic policies enforced by the producers: after all, its presentation in one of the biggest theatrical events of the country cannot conceal that its impact was still framed by geographic, temporal and administrative restrictions. For example, the renovating force of Veronese’s adaptation was tamed by the fact that, because of its own nature, the festival was expected to be an ‘exotic’ showcase of foreign productions to national audiences; as part of a “global marketplace” that brought together “hundreds of different shows, people, cultures, and economies for a brief period of time in the compressed space of one city” (Harvie, 2005: 75), the show was contextualised within a framework of ‘otherness’ and valued primarily for its economic marketability. Their symbols were not necessarily presented to be understood but to be observed

as part of an alien and different society; any cultural connection was subordinated to the aesthetic admiration of an aloof cultural artefact.

Technical mishaps and translation problems enhanced the effect: Young (2010) described how the surtitles “seemed to stall at one point leaving us with no idea of what was being said, only to burst back into action at high speed so we could not read it until it caught up”; Hootman (2010) talked about the “gnomic utterances” of the dialogues, “which might have been more at home in an art installation”; and Smith (2010) mentioned “a style of performance that British audiences aren’t accustomed to, and [that] without a grounding in that grammar or decent sur-titling, [makes] the production (...) frustratingly alienating”.¹⁰⁸ That lack of care with a central element of the staging, alongside with a cultural clash between those who accepted an experimental Chekhov (with its absence of absolute truths and its diverse approaches to ‘reality’) and those who preferred a traditional view of both the Russian author and British dramaturgy, led to a critical misunderstanding of the intellectual and social intentions of the show. Incapable, for both personal and external reasons, to fully connect with its world of cross-references and meta-theatricality, the story seemed for these reviewers too convinced of its own importance, too remote to share its cultural reflections; the valuable message, initiated by Chekhov and enhanced by Veronese in his contemporary reworking, was lost in a bafflement that revealed the complexity to embrace different artistic discourses. Used to melancholy and aristocratic interpretations, it was hard for some to accept a production that avoided sentimentalisms and revealed instead the depths of Chekhovian sarcasm and the challenges of social communication. It was a post-modern deconstruction of a paradigmatic piece, analysing “a series of tracks which contradict and cross each other and then separate again, rejecting a central or global signification” (Pavis, 1992: 71): something helped by the

¹⁰⁸ Once more, a British reviewer emphasised the importance of a complete understanding of the text, even when dealing with a production that constantly underlined the ambiguities of language.

director's ability to imply political issues without falling into the realm of agitprop and to give voice to contradictory discourses whose 'righteousness' was left to audiences' interpretations. Masculine vs. feminine, classic vs. modernist, national vs. international: a kaleidoscopic range of interpretations were offered, that in their difficulty to be fully embraced by audiences and critics alike demonstrated the challenges of the entrance of new voices within the realm of conservative theatrical approaches, as well as the contested and fluid notions of national identity.

4. Conclusion

The beginning of this chapter referred to the accelerated process of cultural exchange in the UK. In less than two decades millions of immigrants arrived; their discourses added new voices to urban and local environments, leading to a point where the 'other' "emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we *think* we speak most intimately and indigenously 'between ourselves'" (Bhabha, 1990: 4). There was no difference in the realm of theatre: as the two productions presented in this chapter attested, international discourses entered and influenced British theatre. It is understandable: after a myriad of post-colonial voices surfaced in the past fifty years, many societies faced a redefinition of 'universal' concepts, discovering (within the wider context of globalisation) the necessity of accepting new discourses as part of their own evolving cultural identities, and the value of embracing what was once considered 'exotic' into the national context. As a result, counter-interpretations to dominating views of certain authors or social contexts appeared; from a commercial perspective, British "cultural industries" increased the "creation, production, and commercialization of contents" that explored and capitalised on multicultural values, supposedly generating "values for individuals and societies, (...) [while] promoting and maintaining cultural diversity and ensuring democratic access to culture" (Towse, 2010: 377). Although at the same time

traditional discourses were preserved in some cultural quarters, they were undeniably complemented by other notions of fluidity and change.

'Foreign' productions were, then, an essential part of these processes of communication; as shown in the cases of the Sovremennik Theatre's *Cherry Orchard* and Daniel Veronese Company's *Uncle Vanya*, some companies brought with them not only their aesthetic views on Chekhov but also interesting social interpretations. The Russians combined a valediction of their past as survivors of the Soviet era with a celebration of a theatrical tradition that exalted the political possibilities of the body and a circus-like approach influenced by Meyerhold; meanwhile, Veronese's troupe offered a multivalent staging that was purposely designed to be read as an attack on the desiccating powers of dictatorship, an exploration of the legacies of colonialism or a criticism of highly individualized, consumerist and alienating contemporary cultures. Audiences, depending on their ideological agendas or degrees of cultural connection, read them in the most diverse ways: a tapestry of voices, ranging from Russian émigrés to the citizens of Brighton, proved the existence of a growing cultural plurality and highlighted the necessity to establish dialogues to build newer senses of social identity where traditional discourses and new values could found common ground.

The critical community showed a similar heterogeneity, either supporting the productions' readings or showing their preference for more static notions of nationhood; in the most extreme cases, there was a lack of perception of the political contexts of the shows and a pragmatism that defended the power of the word as a creator of univocal meanings. Finally, producers influenced the processes of distribution and recognition of the shows, subtly changing their interpretations with their personal agendas: Roman Abramovich transformed Sovremennik's show into a spearhead of a cultural and political thaw between the UK and Russia, united by free-market capitalism, while the Brighton

Festival framed a progressive interpretation that celebrated 'otherness' within a context of economic marketability, proper to the contained and temporary space of a cultural festival.

It was, in short, a messy and complex process, that in many ways symbolised the difficulties faced by British society not only when dealing with the arrival of foreign forces, but also when it came to understand and accept their meanings. A clash between progressive and preconceived notions on how to stage the Russian author reflected the resilience –despite the undeniable changes experienced by the country in the past decades– of monolithic and traditional notions of 'nation'. However, the general instability revealed that the time of univocal interpretations of an author or social context had been left behind: voices that could not speak or write before, the 'subalterns' mentioned by Spivak, who had been subjected to "epistemic violence" by "the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject" as a monolithic Other (Spivak, 1995: 24), expressed through drama their real heterogeneity and proposed their own opinions and ideological constructs that recognised themselves on identical grounds with more traditional standpoints. Chekhovian drama, with its mastery of choral voices, its sensibility and humour as "a method of assessing characters objectively" (Gottlieb, 2001), became an ally: one flexible enough to allow the exploration of new interests without completely decontextualizing national dramatic traditions. Just as it could be used to propagate and sustain conservative ideals, now –with the support of those discourses offered by international productions– it recovered its disrupting quality, and therefore proposed an "aesthetic education" characterised by "an uneven and only apparently accessible contemporaneity that can no longer be interpreted by such nice polarities as modernity/tradition, colonial/postcolonial" (Spivak, 2012: 2).

British-born playwrights and directors, of course, also recognised the possibilities offered by this reading: they also used Chekhov to reinstate viewpoints that had been previously obscured or neglected. This will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Three: the national 'other' as expressed in local rewritings of Chekhov

1. Introduction

As seen throughout this thesis, starting from the second half of the 20th century the monolithic notions of British national identity started to be challenged. The previous chapter offered a view on how international discourses confronted these established notions; this one will reveal a multivalent 'otherness' developed within the country by local creators, which celebrated ethnic and gendered discourses that had been previously minimised and that found their expression through progressive dramatic expressions such as the rewriting of canonical Chekhovian pieces. Sam Holcroft's *Vanya*, premiered at the Gate Theatre in London on the second half of 2009, and John Byrne's *The Cherry Orchard*, presented in early 2010 in Edinburgh, were two good examples of this: one the work of a young female playwright who rose to prominence thanks to "*Cockroach*, [a play] about the male propensity for war" (Billington, 2009); the other the late work of a consecrated Scottish author "known as a writer [of] the television series *Tutti Frutti*" and his 1978 play "*The Slab Boys (...)*, acknowledged as a ground-breaking moment in Scottish theatre" (Hewison, 2011). Both of them shared a similar creative impulse, focused on the re-contextualisation of Chekhov in a different geo-political context, heavily rewriting his plays in order to give them a new interpretation while respecting the original plot structure and those characters that the new authors considered to be the most important ones. The results were two revealing works that, due to their presentation in non-West End spaces (a London fringe theatre and a venue at the capital of Scotland), and because of their inherent thematic content (one concentrated on the battle of the genders and the other referring to the tense relationship between Scotland and a centralised London administration),

exposed ideological and aesthetic angles that the most conservative Chekhovian readings of national identity had left unexplored.

First of all, though, it is important to understand the evolution and strengthening of this notion of the individual 'other', always implicitly present but properly developed from a theoretical and political perspective with the arrival of the feminist and post-colonial discourses in the second half of the twentieth century. The term, as a philosophical notion, predates this period: Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* –originally published in 1807–, was one of the very first writers to point out the necessity of an external force in order to construct individual identity, when mentioning that “self-consciousness is certain of itself only by superseding this *other* that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life (...) self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (Hegel, 1998: 109-111). This idea was taken and developed later on by other important thinkers, such as Husserl and Sartre; for the purposes of this work, it is relevant to mention the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who in his philosophical texts coined a notion of the 'Other' which according to his view was indispensable for the construction of both personal and social ethics. In his book *Totality and Infinity*, published in 1961, he defined the 'I' as “not a being that always remain the same, but (...) the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to him” (Levinas, 1979: 36). This implied a constant redefinition influenced by external elements, where the face-to-face encounter with an 'Other' who is equally free and ever-changing made the I liable to account for itself by “recognising in the Other a right over [its] *egoism*” (Levinas, 1979:

40).¹⁰⁹ This “presence before a face”, where the I can only reach transcendence through the communication with the Other, ultimately also led to responsibility and fraternity:

For the presence before a face, my orientation toward the Other, can lose the avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands. This relationship established over the things henceforth possibly common, that is, susceptible of being said, is the relationship of conversation. (...) To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught.

(Levinas, 1979: 52).

In sum, the Lithuanian-French philosopher highlighted the indispensability of dialogue and alterity to build and learn an idea of totality; extrapolated from a subjective and individual level to a collective one, this approach was proposed too as the base for a social construction. “Society does not proceed from the contemplation of the true; truth is made possible by relation with the Other my master. Truth is thus bound with the social relation, which is justice. Justice consists in recognising in the Other my master (Levinas, 1979: 72). As a Jew who had experienced the atrocities of fascism, his understanding of the self as connected to the Other and the celebration of communication had then a political meaning: if a better and more stable world was to be established, it was necessary to avoid schemes where a monolithic universe could be celebrated

¹⁰⁹ The use of a capital O in ‘Other’ is not casual: following Plato’s notion of the Ideas, Levinas proposed an otherness that transcended individual limitations of race, gender and/or nation. Instead, it was an abstraction whose validity pretended to be universal.

and maintained. Only through this fashion it would be possible “to access to the Other without rhetoric, which is ruse, emprise, and exploitation” – that is, to avoid a dominating discourse where subjugation was implicitly maintained (Levinas, 1979: 72).

From a theatrical perspective, where dialogues occupy an important position, this last quote is also relevant in the sense that it underlined the prevalence through aesthetic language of unethical behaviours: in fact, inspired by Plato’s criticisms, Levinas considered Art itself as potentially harmful. In his essay *Reality and its Shadow* (1938) he described Art as a “meanwhile”, an interval that eternized a present and therefore was incapable of going “beyond it, because, being unable to end, it can’t go toward the *better*”. Therefore, “it was essentially disengaged (...) in a world of initiative and responsibility, [becoming] a dimension of evasion” (Levinas, 1987: 12). Ultimately, this suggested that any artistic concoction –including theatre– could not help to establish that communication with the Other that was so ethically relevant for Levinas; for the purposes of this chapter and the remaining sections of the thesis, however, and while avoiding a more in-depth critique of this perspective which goes beyond the scope of this work¹¹⁰, it can be signaled here that the philosopher indicated in the same essay the relevance of criticism, mainly because it reintroduced Art “into the intelligible world in which it stands, and which is the true homeland of

¹¹⁰ It can be presented here, however, a sketch of a possible critique. At the beginning of his essay, Levinas wrote “Does not the function of art lie in not understanding? Does not obscurity provide it with its very element and a completion *sui generis*, foreign to dialectics and the life of ideas? Will we then say that the artist knows and expresses the very obscurity of the real?” (Levinas, 1987: 3); despite the implied pejorative connotations, this is a revealing affirmation that actually signalled Art as a space of revealing ambiguity, a window to the complexities of life that offered a vast degree of interpretations. But instead of considering that the appreciation of “a novel and a picture is to no longer have to conceive, is to renounce the effort of science, philosophy, and action” (Levinas, 1987: 12), the act of reflective reading and observation could be seen as an urge *proposed* by the work itself, due to the constant reinterpretations and reflections it asks from different readers that come from many societies and generations. The ‘slippery’ quality of art would become then its greatest asset: in its metaphorical ambiguity it would lead to, one, a perpetual process of reinterpretation by the individual reader that would parallel the constant reformation of the ‘I’ by surrounding elements, and two, a recognition of the multiplicity of views offered by the abovementioned societies and generations, which would lead to the creation of dialogues between these forces and –on a more philosophical level– to the empowerment of the multivalence and responsibility offered by the Other.

the mind. (...) The interpretation of criticism speaks in full self-possession, frankly, through concepts, which are like the muscles of the mind" (Levinas, 1987: 13). The following analysis of productions, then, could be read as an attempt to reveal not only a socio-political and gendered 'otherness' in dramatic rewritings of Chekhov, but most importantly the existence of this (previously obscured) diversity within society itself. Indeed, as it will be seen below, both shows counteracted a conservative and monolithic view of national identity; through their characters and plots they proposed instead a more unstable understanding of nation, highlighting the power of the Other in the ethical construction of society.

To further emphasise the value of this social 'otherness', as well as the way it was controlled by political and imperial projects, it must be mentioned here too the interpretation of the term developed by Edward Said in his seminal text *Orientalism*, published for the first time in 1979. Referring to the discursive control of the West over an 'exotic' East, he mentioned how "a certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner's privilege; because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery" (Said, 2006: 44): specially during conquest projects such as the British Empire, it was possible to "use categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and the end points of analysis, research, and public policy", therefore polarising "the distinction (...) and limit[ing] the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies" (Said, 2006: 86). In the discursive universe created by political inequality, the possibility of a meaningful exchange between two cultures was impossible, mainly because it would have led to the revalorisation of the oppressed; it was necessary instead to create a partial and incomplete view of the 'Other', in order to justify the impositions over it. The so-called Orientalist discourse "conceived of the difference between cultures, first, as creating a battlefield that separates (...), and second, as inviting the West to control, contain, and otherwise govern (through superior knowledge and accommodating power)

the Other” (Said, 2006: 48): a genuine exchange was denied, and in its place minority cultural and political forces were continuously exploited and silenced. Communication with the Other, conceived by Levinas as “the proximity of the neighbour, (...) an ineluctable moment of the revelation of an absolute presence which expresses itself” (Levinas, 1979: 78), was displaced and negated, replaced by a rhetoric that promoted a separation from ‘inferior’ and ‘underdeveloped’ communities.

This did not happen only in distant colonized lands, though; throughout the twentieth century, especially during its first half, these views were used by the holders of the power of the (increasingly weakened) Empire to segregate and misrepresent underpowered cultures living within the UK. Due to a complex and messy historical background, different regions of the country saw their social identity erased under the cloak of a monolithic discourse.¹¹¹ Following Said’s idea on the construction of an imperial identity, Linda Colley developed in her text *Britishness and Otherness* that the notion of Britishness was built by “an extraordinarily warlike state, [which] was for a long time both aggressively and successfully imperialistic”; it was an artificial creation which combined different local interests that “defined themselves (...) not just through an internal and domestic dialogue but in conscious opposition to the Other beyond their shores” (Colley, 1992: 311-316). Therefore, behind the singular term existed a complex net of identities that never completely integrated: “we need to stop thinking in terms of Britishness as the result of an integration and homogenization of disparate cultures (...); the four parts of the United Kingdom have been connected in markedly different ways and with sharply varying degrees of success” (Colley, 1992: 314-316). Examples abound: Scotland preserved, even after integration in the early 18th century, a degree of social independence that brought occasional skirmishes between it and the capital; and

¹¹¹ It cannot be forgotten how at the same time Chekhovian discourses within the country were preserving traditional views of national identity based on a nostalgic celebration of the Empire.

the Irish had strong nationalistic and cultural developments that contrasted with an external view of them by the other regions as an alien and underdeveloped community.¹¹² The 'Other' was then always inside; and despite the military and legislative control exerted by England and London, the remaining members of the Union preserved unique traditions and social discourses that problematised an immovable notion of national identity.¹¹³ This does not mean that the central control was always destructive, or that there was not any communication between the constitutive parts of the UK: besides the influence of important thinkers and artists from all regions in the general advancement of the country, "rich, landed, and talented males from Wales, Scotland, England, and to a lesser extent Ireland became welded after the 1770s into a single ruling class that intermarried, shared the same outlook, and took to itself the business of governing, fighting for, and profiting from Greater Britain" (Colley, 1992: 325-326). But despite this there was a clear hierarchization, with a moral-economic superiority built around the centre of power and the positioning of other cultural forces in different degrees of respect and comradeship but not necessarily equality. Inside the UK, the differences were temporarily put aside in favour of the colonial project and the economic exploitation of the 'exotic' Other; as David White wrote in *How old is Britishness?*, from the end of the eighteenth century "a stronger *sense* of Britishness served as an integrative function in what was essentially a young quasi-federalist state. (...) As well as binding classes, the empire also bound regions, in particular the Scots and Anglo-Irish who played a disproportionate role in the founding, protection and administration of that empire" (White, 2015). However, when this

¹¹² This sense of alienation never truly disappeared; due to a diversity of reasons such as geographic separation and religious divergences (Catholicism vs. Protestantism), the union between Ireland and the rest the Union was unstable at best, lasting only between 1800 and 1920 (and surviving only throughout the peak of the Imperial project).

¹¹³ The notion of 'otherness' was so extended, in fact, that it was widespread even inside the same 'regions': "in the early 1800s", for example, "some Lowland Scots still automatically referred to their Highland neighbours as savages or as aborigines" (Colley, 1992: 314). There is then little doubt that, had they ever had the chance, any of these regional forces would have imposed a similar control and cultural simplification to their fellow neighbours; it was only the historical, political and economic success of England as the centre of an Empire that led to its imposition of local discourses all over the world.

construction started to crumble after World War I, leading to the end of the colonial era in the late 1950s, the long-time minimised notions of alterity resurfaced, bringing back renovated notions of 'Irishness', 'Scottishness' and 'Welshness', and forcing the entire country to look inwards and recognise "the cultural splits (...), the gaps in experience and sympathy among different regions, social classes, and religious groupings" (Colley, 1992: 325): a situation that, in a context of increased globalisation and both internal and external immigration, positioned individuals in a world of conflicting cultural forces.

Parallel to this, another element that was also reconsidered from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries was that of the position of women within society, as well as their influence in the creation of new socio-political and aesthetic views of national identity. For many years, indeed, men had controlled the economic and political forces of the nation, as well as the ethical and moral ideologies through which the female population was judged: as quoted above, "rich, landed, and talented *males* from Wales, Scotland, England (...) took to [themselves] the business of governing, fighting for, and profiting from Greater Britain" (Colley, 1992: 325-326, my emphasis). Although it is true that between 1700 and the late 1950s there were important female figures like Queen Victoria who deeply influenced the development of the nation, it is undeniable that their actions were contextualised within a male frame that imposed certain expectations and rules to their actions.¹¹⁴ As Helena Wojtczak (2009b) developed, this simplified view had been legally enforced before the creation of the Empire, since the times of the medieval English Common Law where "a woman's legal identity disappeared upon marriage; she was a woman eclipsed, covered by her husband. She [could not] contract, sue or be sued. All her property, her dowry or portion, and anything she earned or inherited during the marriage belonged automatically to her husband". It would take until the

¹¹⁴ This was not unique of the UK, but rather a common trait of many countries at the time.

end of the eighteenth century, with the works of figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft and her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), to start building a different notion of women as figures with equal intellectual and social potentialities; and to the efforts of organisations like the “Langham Place Group, (...) a group of politically-minded women” founded in 1859, to begin a political campaign towards female rights in education, marriage and the law (Wojtczak, 2009b). But even at this point the female being was considered an inferior creature both physically and mentally: although “an average of 200,000 signatures a year were collected in support of votes for women from 1870 to 1880”, the editor of *The Times* asserted in 1868 that “physical strength has a good deal to do with politics in innumerable ways, and, for that reason alone, women are not capable of holding their own in the rough contests of the world. (...) They have at present the privileges and the protection of the weak” (Wojtczak, 2009c). According to this train of thought, only socially-accepted moulds, with their focus on private space and motherhood, were considered the ‘true’ essence of female identity. To this, a first feminist wave created social movements such as the Suffragettes (led in the UK by Emmeline Pankhurst’s WSPU [Women's Social and Political Union]), who through a mixture of publications, protests, hunger strikes and political pressure, led to the obtainment of universal vote for women through the Representation of the People Act of 1928.

Political exclusion, then, was defeated in the UK by a movement that pointed out the flaws of a limited male discourse. However, it was still necessary a direct confrontation of gender discrimination beyond the realm of suffrage and into the universe of (among other topics) reproductive rights, sexuality and philosophical empowerment: a position that French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir embraced throughout her literary and essayistic work. In her iconic 1949 book *The Second Sex* the notion of ‘woman’ was presented as one that for centuries had been considered as “the absolute Other, without reciprocity, refusing, against experience, that she could be a subject, a peer” (Beauvoir, 2011: 266); in a patriarchal and religious society, the understanding of femininity

moved between “pairs of opposite terms”, so “the saintly mother has its correlation in the cruel stepmother, the angelic young girl has a perverse virgin (...), and Mother will be said sometimes to equal Life and sometimes Death, and every virgin is either a pure spirit or flesh possessed by the devil” (Beauvoir, 2011: 267). The resulting view led to a simplified understanding of womanhood, which through either idealization or rejection allowed more control and oppression over its aesthetic, social and political potentials; ‘otherness’ became a synonym of exclusion, openly clashing with Levinas’ theory of the Other as a positive source of knowledge and ethical communication. Indeed, as pointed out by Claire Elise Katz, “according to de Beauvoir, Levinas assume[d] a masculine privilege when he maintain[ed] the subject/object dichotomy where he, Levinas qua male, occupie[d] the position of subject, and the feminine, the ‘mysterious’ feminine, occupie[d] the position of object” (Katz, 2001: 146). From this point of view, then, Levinas would be guilty of dismissing femininity by positioning it as a perpetual Other, utterly incapable to dialogue and to have its own identity and personality.¹¹⁵

To counteract this reading and defend Levinas’ more positive understanding of the term, it must be pointed out that, as Claire Elise Katz (2001: 148) indicated after exploring the Judaic roots of the Lithuanian-French philosopher’s thoughts, “the feminine [is] not only a transcendental condition for the ethical but a figure of the ethical itself”: that is, rather than being a secondary or passive figure, the feminine also possesses a renovating value, a capacity to construct through its difference another angle of the socio-individual ethical order. Also, for the purposes of this work, it is worth mentioning, as Rosemarie Tong (2006: 219) did in *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*,

¹¹⁵ Feminists of later generations also criticised Levinas’ definition of the Other. Perhaps the most relevant was Belgian-French philosopher Luce Irigaray, who commented on the way it has been connected to a female notion of Nature/Matter, as opposed to a male posture of subjectivity and self-consciousness: by symbolically playing “a transcendental role, (...) making possible the man’s transcendence to the ethical, (...) she is cast downward” (Katz, 2001: 146-147). However, as the next paragraph will indicate, it is also possible to go beyond this reading and read femininity through a positive light.

how Beauvoir's notion of 'otherness' changed throughout the years, becoming not something to be transcended but an advantage that offered the possibility to criticise from a different perspective "the norms, values, and practices that the dominant culture (patriarchy) seeks to impose on everyone, including those who live on its periphery –in this case, women. Thus, Otherness, for all its associations with oppression and inferiority, is much more than an oppressed, inferior condition. Rather, it is a way of being, thinking, and speaking that allows for openness, plurality, diversity, and difference". There was, in a few words, an increased fluidity in the understanding of alterity, which acquired an even wider and more playful development in the work of a new generation of feminists, such as Judith Butler and her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). In it, the US writer proposed to reconsider both gender and sex as socially-enforced performances, capable of constant transformation: "woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. (...) Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1999: 43-44). As it was concurrently happening to social identities, womanhood became progressively fluid; despite the continuation of some oppressive social systems, the understanding of femininity was acknowledged by the end of the 20th century as the result of what Sabrina Petra Ramet (2002: 2) described as a "gender culture", "a society's understanding of what is possible, proper and perverse in gender-linked behaviour and more specifically, that set of values, mores, and assumptions which establishes which behaviours are to be seen as gender-linked, with which gender or genders they are to be seen as linked, what is the society's understanding of gender in the first place, and, consequently, how many genders there are". In other words, rather than to accept a given and monolithic notion of the self, theorists emphasised the social and shifting qualities of gender, opening the door to more plural notions of femininity.

British theatre, as other artistic fields within the UK, expressed the influence of these renovating discourses, opening to a more comprehensive array of dramatic creations that reflected these overlapping identities; and Chekhovian drama, as a representative of the social and economic transformations of the country, articulated these elements through a creative approximation of the Russian author, which included the rewriting of his plays to more recent contexts that reflected these new understandings of the Other that came not exclusively from the influence of international forces, but also as part of those internal redefinitions within the country.¹¹⁶ The historical contextualisation of this work briefly presented some examples of this trend, which grew during the late 1970s and acquired a renovated maturity in the 1990s: regarding the creation of new social identities, an example that could be expanded here is *Uncle Vanya's* adaptation *August*, written by Julian Mitchell: a creation that publisher Amber Lane Press described in 1994 (the year of its original presentation and publication) as a “stunning adaptation to Victorian north Wales (...), which dispenses with many of the alienating Russian principles –confusing patronymics– and theatrical clichés –birch forests and samovars– that characterise most modern British productions” (Doollee, n.d.). More than the unnecessary generalisation regarding national productions, especially at that point of time when different interpretations had already entered the domestic stage, it is revealing that the author recreated the play at the same historical context that Komisarjevsky chose in the 1920s: the same era, however, was described not as one of romantic reveries and nostalgic reverberations, but as an uncertain world where a sense of abandonment was felt by those living in the periphery of the imperial centre. Also, put in the context of 1994, in the leading-up to the 1999 elections that would eventually give Wales an independent National Assembly, the presence of an adaptation such as this one served as a vindication of local values and ‘traditions’: the fact that it

¹¹⁶ The strengthening of postmodernist performance, with its reutilization and resignification of previously created material, no doubt influenced the growing presence of these shows in the UK.

premiered at the Clwyd Theatr Cymru, self-described as “Wales’ major drama producing operation, originally built as a Regional Arts Centre” (Clwyd Theatr Cymru, 2014), with the direction and performance of celebrated actor Anthony Hopkins in the role of Vanya – Ieuan Davis, reveals the way it was used to boost both a sense of local pride and the possibility of a more balanced cultural exchange with England (the author being originally from the Epping Forest district of the English county of Essex).¹¹⁷ Ultimately, it was an example of a tradition previously described by Gareth F. Jones in his article *Far from the West End: Chekhov and the Welsh language 1924-1991*, who explored how the Russian author’s presence in the area was “a permanent revolution” that helped first “Welsh drama (...) to move through the Ibsen barrier” and ultimately allowed, through “the humour in the plays, the plain but poetic speech of Chekhov’s characters, (...) [a] magic transmutation of those elements which had been the crude stuff of the homespun Welsh kitchen comedies, the quiet dramas of ordinary people leading ordinary lives, what Saunders Lewis had called ‘the people’s life and dreams’” (Jones, 2008: 101, 105, 110).¹¹⁸ In fact, these transformative qualities are a constant in other areas of the country, as it will be seen with the Scottish *Cherry Orchard* analysed below: the Russian author, who had been useful for the imperial necessities carried by the most traditional notions of ‘Britishness’, started to be used now by members of theatrical peripheries as a guide to understand new notions of nation, locality and identity.

It is harder to find illustrative instances to the development of the female Other through Chekhovian dramaturgy –in itself, this reflects a general trend that, as indicated in an investigation presented in December 2012 in *The Guardian*, “is partly due to the legacy of the classical canon: in Shakespeare

¹¹⁷ The importance given to the adaptation was such that Hopkins and Mitchell eventually adapted it to the big screen, under the same title, in 1996.

¹¹⁸ The universe of Welsh productions is a rich field waiting for a more comprehensive study. Due to the lack of elaborate Chekhovian productions within the timeframe chosen here, as well as the necessity of an ultimate subjective selection process in this work, no shows of the area will be analysed. For more historical information, please refer to the abovementioned article by W. Gareth Jones.

16% of the parts are for women, and the greatest roles are less weighty than those of their male counterparts” (Higgins, 2012b). This goes well beyond the available possibilities for actresses: looking only “at the top 10 subsidised theatres in England” –a limitation that did not consider the position of women in less developed regions of the country– the averages showed a clear minority of women in nearly all areas of theatrical involvement, 33% at board level, 24% in the directing field, 23% inside creative teams, and 35% in the case of playwriting (Higgins, 2012a). Despite a slow yet steady increase, the possibilities of seeing female-led interpretations on the stage continued to be smaller than those overseen by men: historically, and in the more precise field of Chekhovian interpretations, the number was equally reduced, although valuable in its historical importance. Two cases were given already: the recurrent use of Constance Garnett’s canonical translations¹¹⁹ and the amateur direction of Chekhov’s first satires by countess Bariatska during the early 1920s.¹²⁰ To those cases, other exemplary productions would be the 1928 presentations of *The Cherry Orchard* and *Uncle Vanya* at the Garrick Theatre of London, performed by the Prague Group (a troupe created by former performers of the MAT) under the direction of actress and businesswoman Maria Germanova; a 1949 *Seagull*, directed at the Lyric Hammersmith by Irene Hentschl, who later on became “the first woman to direct full-time at the Stratford Memorial (later the Royal Shakespeare)” (Howe Kritzer, 1999: 397); and Nancy Meckler’s 1979 *Uncle Vanya*, in a

¹¹⁹ Her versions, however, were reworked by different directors: as mentioned before, Komisarjevsky heavily cut her translation of *Three Sisters* for his 1926 performance, while at the same time adding new sections, musical cues and stage movements (see Tracy, 1993: 70-74). Her success, then, was also partly based on convenience and the lack of other available translations at the time.

¹²⁰ Female directors served as the most fervent supporters of Chekhovian dramaturgy during those first formative years, before the ground-breaking Komisarjevsky performances took place: to these examples it could be added the efforts of Edith Craig and Vera Donnet, the first one presenting *The Bear*, *The Wedding* and *On the High Road* at St. Martin’s Theatre in 1920, the second doing full-length performances of *The Seagull*, *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* in 1919 and 1920 (Miles & Young, 1993: 238-239). It could be argued that, once the political values imposed by Komis’ interpretations turned Chekhov into an assimilated member of the British stage –with all the conservative connotations that it implied–, the space for female-directed readings of the author was severely narrowed.

version by Pam Gems, well known “for plays about women, including *Piaf* (1978) and *Camille* (1984), both produced by the RSC’s Other Place” (Howe Kritzer, 1999: 399).¹²¹ The influence of these shows, among others, was partly minimised by a sea of male-directed plays, which tended to receive more critical attention and therefore had a clearer influence in the development of British Chekhovian dramaturgy; however, their pioneer efforts led to more confident generations of female directors, including Phillida Lloyd and Deborah Warner. In the 21st century, an instance of this renovated female creativity was a 2013 *Seagull* directed by Blanche McIntyre for the company *Headlong*: as Lyn Gardner from *The Guardian* wrote, on it “the revolt of young against the old, the past against the present, the cosiness of the familiar and the shock of the new [were] all pushed to the fore” (Gardner, 2013). While respecting the original text and avoiding anachronistic elements, the performance aimed for an expressionistic portrayal of the emotions of the main characters: turning the stage into a highly stylized space, through the use of projections and “a back wall used for graffiti like blank page in Trigorin’s notebook”, the processes of artistic creation and the aesthetic and emotional battles between characters from different generations were emphasised (Gardner, 2013). Perhaps more revealingly, the character of Nina –sometimes portrayed as a pathetic victim, controlled by Trigorin and abandoned in a world of self-deception– was played as a figure whose final decision to continue being an actress proved at least liberating, part of a difficult yet enlightening moral awakening. In a symbolic way, this represented the power of femininity both on the stage and beyond it: one built around a bittersweet sense of self-respect despite the oppressive circumstances provided by male-dominated discourses. In a few words, it was a proposal that other writers –like Sam Holcroft, creator of the *Uncle Vanya* production presented in this chapter– developed into a new level of contemporary and local complexity.

¹²¹ This selection is by no means comprehensive, only representative.

As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, the following pages' goal is to interpret the two selected performances, based on their explorations of 'otherness' within socio-ethnic and feminine fields; in so doing, it will capture how Chekhov exposed some of the internal transformations of the country at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. First, a Scottish production of *The Cherry Orchard* written by John Byrne will be considered, analysing how it respected the general structure of the play and the original characters, but moved the story to the times of the failed Independence Referendum of 1979. This will allow a consideration of the evolution of the notion of 'Scottishness' and its mixing with both 'English' and 'British' concepts of nationhood and social identity; put in the historical context of the 2010 publication of a Bill's draft that would eventually lead to the establishment of a new Referendum in the autumn of 2014, when the independence of Scotland from the UK was eventually rejected, the timing of the production and its critical reception will be seen as part of a wider discussion on both the conceptualization of the nation as a whole and its regional complexities.

Meanwhile, the *Uncle Vanya* adaptation, written by female playwright Sam Holcroft, will be shown to be characterised by a sharpening of the gender conflicts suggested in the original, exalted in brutal fashions by the contemporary reinterpretation of the characters. Through the analysis of stylistic choices such as the focus of the story on only five characters, the introduction of extended monologues that served as streams of consciousness where they expressed their contradictory desires and expectations, and a staging that enclosed the action in a claustrophobic and alienating space, this section will indicate not only the respect that this production had for the original, interculturally rewriting it to find new subtleties while keeping a similar plot development, but also how it offered a nightmarish reflection on the position of femininity in a urban context where male-dominated discourses were still prevalent.

In both cases the analytical focus will lie specially (although not exclusively) in the dialogues of the dramas, exploring on the one side the relationship between Chekhov and his contemporary rewriters, and on the other how these versions influenced the staging and reflected cultural transformations within the UK: following Levinas (1979: 51), the final objective is to show how in the productions' dialogue between authors from different times and locations, in their revalidation of previously unheard voices, and in their communication between actors and spectators, the reception "from the Other beyond the capacity of the I (...), the relation with the Other, or Conversation, in a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation" can be more clearly seen.

2. Cherries transplanted: Royal Lyceum Theatre's *The Cherry Orchard* (16 April – 8 May 2010)

The presentation of a Chekhovian production in Scotland at the end of the first decade of the 21st century could be seen, in many ways, as the continuation of an old tradition: as presented in the historical contextualisation, it was in Glasgow in 1909 when the Russian author was translated and performed for the first time inside the UK, symbolically representing the interests of a generation of Scottish dramatic pioneers who were breaking from the dependence of England as the theatrical centre of the country. One hundred years later, this effort had been accomplished: as host of some of the biggest theatrical events in the world like the Edinburgh International Festival and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and with established local companies such as the National Theatre of Scotland, the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow and the Traverse Theatre and Royal Lyceum in Edinburgh, Scotland had become a region of great dramatic productivity. Many challenges still remained, though: as the journalist Joyce McMillan (2010a) developed in her review at *The Scotsman*, the John Byrne and Lyceum Theatre's production of *The Cherry Orchard* –premiered in May 2010 and directed by Tony Cownie– marked "another step in Scotland's effort to come to terms with its own

history". This indicated the importance of the Russian's dramas as a field through which the exploration of regional matters could be done, and the political situation of a region expressed right in the middle of a transformative era.

Indeed, the situation of Scotland in 2010 was particularly interesting, mainly due to a series of proposals which were connected to its conversion –or not– into a fully independent country. This is an idea that, as seen below, permeated and in many ways defined the themes and characters of the Lyceum's *Cherry Orchard* adaptation (which, it must be remembered, transplanted the play to Scotland); in order to fully understand it, and to see the final theatrical result both as a comment of the then contemporary situation of the region and as a retrospective look on the developments of local national identity, it is necessary to consider first the historical situation of Scotland and the entire UK between 1978 and 1979, during the so-called Winter of Discontent. Named by the then editor of *The Sun*, Larry Lamb, following *Richard III's* lines "Now is the Winter of our Discontent / Made glorious summer by this sun of York" (Shakespeare, 1993), this period marked the final popular expression against the economic politics of the Labour Party, represented then by Prime Minister James Callaghan. In an attempt to control the increasing inflation of the country, he "hoped to keep public sector power pay claims under 5%"; but when "tanker drivers forced the Government to give them a 14% raise, the floodgates opened", leading by the end of January 1979 to a general industrial action which included "water workers, ambulance drivers, sewerage staff and dustmen" that paralysed the country (Segell, 1997: 93). For the Scottish population, this period was even more challenging due to a parallel situation: the voting of a Referendum that planned the creation of a Scottish Assembly, a long-held political aspiration that would have returned some legislative power to the region after centuries of British control (more specifically, since the 1707 Act of Union). Although exciting, this scheme had its fair amount of problems, principally because the proposed organisation had "no taxation powers", and in the case of having been established "there would

have been ample room for its operation to be hampered by an unclear division of powers, which would have been open to legal challenge” (Lynch, 2001: 11). That uncertainty partly explains why on 1 March 1979 the turnout was 63.6% of the total electorate; and although the ‘Yes’ won with 51.6% of the votes no change ensued due to another rule of the Agreement Pact that stipulated that a final approval by the Parliament would only be considered if a positive answer was embraced by more than 40% of Scotland’s total registered electorate (the percentage reached then was of only 32.6%; Lynch, 2001: 10). A solution could have been reached had the Labour party supported a repeal of the result by a Statutory Instrument to be approved by Parliament; however, the government decided to abandon devolution, in an action that led the Scottish National Party (SNP) to withdraw its support and directly led to a crisis that marked the end of Callaghan’s Prime Ministry. Forced by a vote of no confidence, elections were called for 3 May 1979 and Tory Leader Margaret Thatcher rose to power; in the new political atmosphere, interested in a more monolithic notion of national identity, the possibility of an independent legislative force for Scotland was temporarily closed.

It would take 18 years, until the arrival of New Labour to power, for the independence of Scotland to receive political support once more. In 1997, soon after the beginning of Tony Blair’s Prime Ministry, a new Scottish devolution Referendum was held: as Peter Lynch wrote, this second attempt had “a wider democratic agenda (...), with consensus politics, civic engagement and consultative practices” (Lynch, 2001: 11). It was the result of a process of preparation and socialisation started (without the endorsement of the then Conservative Government) in the early 1990s: following two publications of the Scottish Constitutional Convention –created in 1989 by the SNP–, untitled *Towards Scotland’s Parliament* (1990) and *Scotland’s Parliament, Scotland’s Right* (1995), by the time political support from Westminster returned a proposal for a “129-member Parliament, with seventy-three constituency and fifty-six list members” had already been prepared,

connected to plans for “tax powers, devolved responsibilities, relations with local government, and public participation in the Parliament” (Lynch, 2001: 12). The final Referendum text presented to voters only had two questions, one regarding the creation of the organisation itself, the second focused on the possibility of this group to have tax-varying powers: the final result was a yes-yes, with a respective majority of 74.3% and 63.5% on each question, and an overall turnout of 60.4% (BBC, 1997).¹²² As a result, a year later the Scotland Act 1998 was approved, which created the final regulations and ensured both the elections and the first session of the Parliament in 1999 –the first time since the previous organisation had been adjourned in 1707. A new age for the relationship between Scotland and the rest of the UK started, which reinvigorated the region as a semi-independent territory, and allowed a more thorough questioning of the possibilities of a complete political independence from Westminster.

In 2007, the newly formed minority government of the SNP, led by Alex Salmond, followed its own political manifesto and published a White Paper entitled *Choosing Scotland’s Future*, where a “national conversation” about “the full range of options which would be debated”, including the preservation of the “devolved set-up”, the redesign of “devolution by extending the powers of the Scottish Parliament in specific areas”, and the “full independence”, was proposed (BBC, 2007). However, parliamentary opposition from other parties blocked all attempts to pass a Scotland Bill first published on 25 February 2010, and ultimately forced its withdrawal. It would take another general election in 2011, and the obtaining of the general majority by the SNP, for the party to successfully restart the process, leading to negotiations with the coalition government of Prime Minister David Cameron, and the reaching of “a deal over the independence referendum” in October 2012, where “the United Kingdom government, which has responsibility over constitutional

¹²² The turnout was lower than in 1979, although this did not affect this time the approval of the results.

issues, (...) [granted] limited powers to the Scottish Parliament to hold a legal referendum” that would finally take place on Thursday 18 September 2014 (BBC, 2012). After years of negotiations, the region had reached a breaking point in its history: one where Scottish citizens had to decide if they wanted to break with over 300 years of history and become an independent country.

Naturally, the atmosphere surrounding this historical decision influenced all spheres of Scottish society, including the dramatic arts. For example, in 2010 Scottish playwright David Greig wrote a sequel to *Macbeth* titled *Dunsinane*: premiered that same year at the Hampstead Theatre of London, and revived a year later at the Royal Lyceum in Edinburgh, it dismissed the positive presentation of Malcom’s kingdom suggested at the end of Shakespeare’s play, highlighting instead its instability and dependence on “the invading English army led by Northumbrian Siward” (Billington, 2010). At the heart of the story, which confronted these political forces, lay “the idea that Scotland [was] too complex, tribal and territorially distinctive ever to be understood by the English” (Billington, 2010): a reading that, in the context of the independence debate, carried an implicit message in defence of self-control and nationality over external socio-political impositions.

Chekhov’s plays and stylistic inclinations also served an important role in the understanding of these historical questionings. In the same year of 2010, as part of the 150th celebration of the author’s birth, the Scottish stages saw a variety of Chekhovian productions: Lung Ha’s Theatre Company, a troupe specialised in providing opportunities “for people with learning disabilities” (Burns, 2010), presented at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh *Romance With a Double Bass* and *The Two Volodyas*, two twenty-minute shows based on Chekhov’s short stories that mixed improvisational elements, comedy sketches, tragic episodes and live music to propose a lively and contemporary rendition of the Russian author; meanwhile, director Kenny Miller, working with lunchtime company A Play, a Pie and a Pint at the cultural venue Òran Mór in Glasgow, compressed *The Seagull* to four actors

and an hour of length, all while slightly modernizing the plot and underlining its tragicomic connotations, where all the characters became “transient and often deluded figures, struggling to snatch some meaningful experience out of their brief time on earth, before oblivion claims them again” (McMillan, 2010b). Together, these dramatic propositions did not openly explore Scottish independence, but they indicated the desire by new generations of Scottish artists to introduce previously disregarded figures within the theatrical community, as well as to communicate with audiences beyond the conventional stage.

John Byrne’s and the Lyceum Theatre’s adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard*, presented the same year, did engage directly with the discussion on Scottish identity. The connection was not surprising due to the fact that, by the time he decided to adapt the Russian play, Byrne had already explored this topic throughout his own dramatic creations. One of his most famous creations, the trilogy *The Slab Boys* (originally known as *Paisley Patterns*, and made up of the plays *The Slab Boys*, *Cuttin’ a Rug* and *Still Life*), premiered between 1978 and 1982, that is, during the aforementioned period of Scotland’s self-definition. As Randall Stevenson emphasised, “the identity and culture of Scotland seemed in the 1970s matters of renewed promise, even profit – once again empowering, and with political purpose, Scottish theatre’s interest [lay] both in the nation’s past and in its contemporary life” (Stevenson, 2011: 78). Byrne’s work, centred around a group of young urban workers growing between 1957 and 1972, and expressed through a mixture of kitchen-sink realism, dark humour and subtle poetic symbolism, responded to a need to explore “the effects of Industrial Revolution and capitalist work (...), factory work and the divided society it creates” (Stevenson, 2011: 78). Also, the iconic television program *Tutti Frutti*, originally broadcasted in 1987 on BBC One and produced by BBC Scotland, presented the twisted story of a rock and roll band that worked not only as a “dark and comic exploration of gender relationships (...) [boasting] excellent performances and skilled

direction”, but also as an in-depth analysis of the working-class conditions of the region through the plot device of a ‘Silver Jubilee’ tour (Hutchinson, 2011: 208).

By the time he accepted the Lyceum’s offer to adapt Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard*, Byrne was then qualified to create another portrayal of his homeland, especially in the context of a historical period and generation where we had his first artistic and economic successes. This was not even his first attempt at an adaptation: in 1997 he had already written for the Almeida Theatre in London a new version of Gogol’s *The Government Inspector*, where he used the “translated drama as a mirror in which to reflect the corruptions of Scottish local government” (Corbett, 2011: 101); and, even more importantly for the purposes of this chapter, in 2004 he had already transformed *Uncle Vanya* into *Uncle Varick*, moving the action to “north-east Scotland in 1964” and re-shaping it into a story that, while respecting the original cast of characters, “hilariously conveyed Scotland’s sense of exclusion from the Swinging Sixties and abiding resentment of metropolitan taste-setters” (Billington, 2004).¹²³ To fully understand his 2010 adaptation, then, it is necessary to see it not as an effort isolated from the rest of his creative work, but as part of an ongoing exploration of the political transformations of Scotland and its difficult relationship with other regions of the country. Chekhov’s dramas became for Byrne a framework through which some of his nationalistic inquiries could be expressed: if *Uncle Varick* captured Scotland’s alienation at a time when down south a urban, optimistic and slightly hedonistic generation was blossoming, the Highlands-based *Cherry Orchard* could be seen as spiritual sequel that explored the following decade, “the most painful and sensitive turning-point in recent Scottish political history” (McMillan, 2010a), when a time of illusions vanished due to unfortunate political circumstances.

¹²³ All these adaptations were of Russian classics: an indication of the interest Byrne always felt for the Slavic country, as well as an implicit recognition of the potential that the originals had to be adapted to the exploration of Scottish socio-political issues.

In his production notes, Byrne (2010: 9) described how at a certain stage of the writing-adaptation process he “was not entirely convinced about how well an actual cherry orchard would prosper in the Scottish Highlands to where I had now shifted house and occupants”. His solution to this problem was simple: let the fiction do its work. “If the people of the play know there’s a cherry orchard outside the window then so will we... no matter if we’re in Timbuktu or Tighnabruaich” (Byrne, 2010: 9). For him, the cherry orchard was not only a physical place but a symbol, which after more than a hundred years of productions suggested contradictory memories of childhood, transformation and oppression; to move its ambiguous beauty to the land of Robert Burns and Sir William Scott was not then a mere caprice or a climatologic absurdity. On the contrary, it seemed even appropriate when recognising the unrest experienced both by early 20th century pre-revolutionary Russia and the UK during the winter of 1978/1979: times of uncertainty when established governments faced popular opposition and social chaos. In the case of the UK, these events were the aforementioned Winter of Discontent, the collapse of the Independence Referendum, the vote of no confidence against Callaghan’s government, the call for general elections and the final triumph of Thatcher “as Britain’s first woman Prime Minister with a safe working majority” of “339 seats compared to Labour’s 269” (Segell, 1997: 93-94).

The reasons for the countries’ instabilities were, of course, different: what in Russia was connected to the rejection of the Tsarist government and the enforcement of revolutionary ideals, in Scotland was the result of the economic reforms created after World War II and the dismissal of London’s centralised power. Also, it’s clear that the Slavic country’s case was considerably more volatile and fragmented, as it eventually became clear in the Revolution that dismantled a whole political system. But it’s undeniable that in both cases lay a growing discomfort, a political upheaval over economic privileges and the influence of international discourses versus a strong cultural identity; a struggle between a past full of contradictory remembrances and a blossoming, expectative future.

That gave a similarly powerful background to the characters' ideas and emotions, whose names (although not their personalities) were altered for the Scottish production: for example, Trofimov was renamed Trotsky, and the ideal world announced by the first one through the rejection of "every leaf, every tree trunk" that hid the souls of "owned living souls" (Chekhov, 2007: 1015), was expressed with equal force (yet perhaps less subtlety) in Byrne's version through the second's character declaration of a "New Political Order (...), a Philosophy that embraces both change and a humble acceptance of all that is yet good in this world of ours and to which we have become blinded by commerce and ignorance" (Byrne, 2009: 45). In both cases, the symbol around which the ideas were structured was the same: the cherry garden, possessor of a protean nature and an expression of the intense desires of transformation by some of the radical members of the younger generations of each time period, against (in the first case) physical slavery and (in the second) selfish economic practices. Byrne was right to discard the project of turning the garden into "The Cherry Orchard Hotel": it would not have been possible to suggest the same poetry about an "upmarket B&B" (Byrne, 2010: 9).

There was one difference, though: the perspective from which those two times were depicted. Chekhov located his creation on a then contemporary space; he did not live to see the failed revolts of 1905 and the Russian Revolution of 1917, although he intuitively captured the tension and social unrest that preceded them. John Byrne's adaptation, in its desire to scrutinize a delicate time in Scotland's history, had a similar collective interest; but his analysis, as opposed to Chekhov's, was retrospective. Rather than relocating the action to 2009, Byrne strengthened the social message of the play by moving it to a period that summarised many contradictions of his culture, based not only in "terms of a left-right struggle between establishment and workers", but also –as it was happening at the same time in the rest of the country– "a conflict between old money and the self-made man" (Fisher, 2010). Two previous drafts of the adaptation, in fact, were set in 1968 and at the early

1980's: one the year of the May revolution in Paris and the public criticism to the Vietnam War (and much closer to *Uncle Varick's* time frame), the other the period of Thatcher and Reagan's right-wing governments (Byrne, 2010: 10). Taking into consideration Byrne's political interests, the possibilities of those discarded scenarios can be imagined: how much the first one would have added shades to Ranevskaya–Ramsay's 'nostalgic return' to her infancy house, or her final decision to return to the French capital (an acceptance of progress?); or how strange and even dangerous would have seem Trofimov–Trotsky's declarations of socialist freedom in a time of deeply conservative politics. The value of the final decision, suggested to Byrne by director Tony Cownie, must be then recognised, mainly because it located the story in an intermediate historical point, between the years where Marxist ideals were revitalized by students and trade unions, and Scotland doubted between embracing independence to take charge "of the incalculable wealth promised by the 'black gold'" found "in the North Sea off the coast of Aberdeen" and "to preserve the bonds forged with England during the war and afterwards" (Oliver, 2010: 384), and those years characterised by economic control, the abandonment in the region of "the decades-old practice of state intervention" to support industries "like shipbuilding, coalmining and steel" and a more London-centred notion of British national identity (Oliver, 2010: 388). In other words, this choice captured a transitional universe similar to that of the original, revealing a region "torn between notions of 'Scottishness' and 'Britishness'" (Oliver, 2010: 387) and leaving the characters with different degrees of uncertainty and expectation.

The retrospective posture also influenced the angle from which the idea of 'future' was analysed in the adaptation. Indeed, and opposed to Chekhov's ignorance, Byrne *lived* the upcoming events, discovering how the expectations expressed in the dialogues and monologues turned out to be. This does not change the fact that in both cases the characters ignored their fate and that their contrasting opinions were presented with equal respect: Anya–Aisley's youthful expectations, or

Lopakhin–McCracken’s industrial desires, for example. But it’s inevitable to feel a different mood in both creations: while the original played more with symbolical suggestions and ironies, Byrne’s version went for a more politically involved approach, expressing in darkly humoristic undertones “a searing slice of social commentary, where class war seen in close-up, with only hollow victories for all sides” (*Herald Scotland*, 2010) –that is, a perspective where (following Chekhov’s lead) all views were considered and ridiculed, sometimes with particular acerbity. Different theatrical techniques were used to emphasise political and satirical connotations: the dialogues mentioned specific political issues and politicians of the era, and the costumes (also designed by Byrne) added a subtle caricaturization to the characters, such as in the case of Charlotta–Charlotte. The use of “radio clips” about the Referendum, Callaghan’s government and Thatcher’s rise to power (Radcliffe, 2010) added a political awareness that pointed out to the audience the progressive collapse of the proposal and the arrival of an anti-independence government, casting a pessimistic shadow over the ending: because even if it was undesirable to come back to the “pedantic” (Royal Lyceum, 2010: 9) traditions of Gayev–Ramsay and his pitiful sister, the hint of future problems downplayed McCracken’s announcement –at the end of Act III– of the arrival of a new time of progress and equality. One critic described this as “setting the tone for the tragedy that followed when things, as we know, really did not get better” (*Herald Scotland*, 2010), and other used it as an example of a “new age of brutal entrepreneurship and cash-driven pragmatism” (McMillan, 2010a); although the last idea is an overstatement, if one considers Chekhov’s and Byrne’s humanist approach, it is true that an understated sense of pessimism pervaded the production, criticizing both the older generation for its “tweedy superiority with a gift for blanking out anything what [it did not] want to hear”, and the “cash-rich and empathy-poor” proper to the younger, “loadsamoney generation” (Fisher, 2010). The cherry orchard’s fall, that disappearance of a symbol filled with suggestions, became the harbinger of fate, a Greek-like catastrophe that pushed all the characters

into their futures: futures that were the result of their own previous emotional shortcomings and actions, but that also reflected historical transformations of different social classes in a more overt fashion than in the original play. Firs-Fintry's death at the end, with all its implications regarding the failure of the dream for an independent Scotland, lost some of its individual pathos but in exchange acquired an epic metaphoric intensity.

Because of the diversity of perspectives presented, it must be considered too how the play's rewriting affected individual characters. The first prominent element was also the most obvious: their names' change. Indeed, besides the obvious fact that this transformation was a logical consequence of the location's switch, underlying a "look at class, economic turmoil and exploitation of the Highlands" (Cox, 2010), it's telling how Byrne used it to show the social differences between the protagonists. Pompous names such as Mrs. Ramsay-Mackay or Guy Ramsay reinforced the old-fashioned extravagances and Gallicized interests of the 'aristocratic' characters¹²⁴, while names such as Malcolm McCracken or Mhairi were given to more 'popular' figures; the first one, with its intense Scottish sonority, indicated the local and "ladder-climbing tycoon" mentality of its owner (Cox, 2010), while the second exalted the naiveté and humbleness of the young woman. Also, this class differentiation was underlined by a technique suggested by director Cownie and developed by his actors: the use of accents. Ramsay-Mackay's long, adorned rhythm of speech, full of French inflections, and her brother's comic delivery, contrasted on stage with the reserved intonations of her adopted daughter or Dolina's fast, markedly colloquial and Scottish chatter. This increased the original political subtext of the play, strengthening the interplay between different social classes in 1970s Scotland, without destroying Chekhov's emotional plots: as a post-Revolution idealist, Trotsky was still in love with Ainsley; McCracken had a deep respect for the Ramsays, even if his family had

¹²⁴ Considering their constant references to French literature, it might not be accidental that the second one shared a forename with Guy de Maupassant.

been previously dominated by them; and Ramsay-Mackay admitted her own weaknesses and unhappy love affairs.

Character's adaptations were carefully implemented: even though Lopakhin–McCracken was transformed from the son of former slaves to, “like Thatcher, the child of a grocer”, his basic psychological profile was preserved, allowing a mixture between the poetic intentions of the original and “an immediacy that made sense of its dramatic conflict while reflecting on the political movements of our own times” (Fisher, 2010). Byrne kept in mind the historic contradictions of both countries; as Chekhov, he avoided nationalistic exaltations, criticizing the flaws of the Referendum and the increasing conservatism of the British government while being open about the inequalities inside his own culture, ultimately offering “a love letter to Scotland, but a love letter with a tinge of reproach” (Peter, 2010). As in the original play, the remembrances uttered by the characters revealed subtexts and political territories: Ranevskaya's idyllic memories of childhood, previously contradicted with the suffering of the serfs suggested by Lopakhin, were questioned here through Scotland's elitism and the disguise of servitude through the mask of paid work, so touchingly depicted in one McCracken's monologue referring to how he used to go “around this every house in this town on a winter's mornin' wi' the milk crate on his arm... (...) [arriving] at the back door of the Trades-men's-Entrance to this establishment in his Old Man's grocer van” (Byrne, 2010: 65). Also, Trofimov pre-revolutionary memories, about the oppressed masses and the destruction of beautiful forests, acquired new meanings thanks to Trotsky's knowledge of the Russian Revolution and the international expansion of the ecological project, referred as a “Philosophy that will form the basis for what amounts to a marriage contract between us... we small human beings and this Great Mother Earth upon which we stand” (Byrne, 2010: 45): what used to be ‘avant-garde’ and easily dismissible ideals became strong arguments in favour of ecological organisations like

Greenpeace or countries like the USSR – a move that, considering Byrne’s satirical approach to the material, was not exempt from tragicomic sarcasm.

The staging reinforced this reinterpretation, especially with the use of sound effects and –once more– the costumes. Compared with the original script and Stanislavsky’s staging, both were respected and updated: while all the sonic indications of the previous version were kept (such as “a sudden and chilling sound from afar” that sounds twice in the distance [Byrne, 2010: 46]), a mixture of rock and pop music was added; and even if certain dresses still had an early twentieth century quality, although with characteristic comic touches, others were transformed into a stylized and nostalgic kaleidoscope of 70s styles. This gave a new symbolism to the characterization of the main characters: bookkeeper Yepikhodov was converted into a friendly individual, with his long, unstitched brown trousers; and Charlotte became an even more extravagant person than the original Charlotta, a punk woman with spiky hair and dirty jeans whose inadequacy came more from her eccentric tendencies than her uncertain origin. The excess, however, did not diminish the entrapment of the characters within a remote and asphyxiating rural environment: if anything, it only highlighted the absurdity of the situation, rigorously preferring Chekhov’s comedic overview of the play rather than the morose and sombre Stanislavskian approach. Various elements reinforced this: the use of pauses and silences to underscore a sense of tedium, the introduction of banal songs and physical comedy, and more specifically the interpretation of secondary characters like “family-friend Sorley Shanks (...), clad in platform shoes, tartan flares and a biker moustache” and performed by Grant O’Rourke with “some top-notch slapstick” (Kingham, 2010). Without falling into superficiality, the show used humour as a way to, first, allow a more palatable view of the contradictions and flaws of the characters, and second, create an ‘alienation’ process between stage and audience that increased the comprehension of the socio-historical discussions on national identity that were presented. During the last conversation between Trotsky and McCracken, for

example, the use of fast speech patterns and jokes undercut any possible melodrama, revealing instead a comprehension of the “human reaction to social change” (Murray-Brown, 2010) while at the same time positioning them as representatives of the possible (but aborted, due to the following historical events) dialogue between opposite political spectrums. There cannot be, perhaps, a better indication of the main themes of the production: one that, despite an ending that served as “a terrifying portent of things to come” (Fisher, 2010) by paralleling the orchard’s fall with Thatcher’s rise to power and the consequent hardships for Scotland, still left a door open for exchange between old political foes.

Considered from its attempt to connect with Scottish audiences and communicate aesthetic and social messages, it can be argued then that the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Tony Cownie and John Byrne’s version of *The Cherry Orchard* served as an example of the possibilities of an elaborate intercultural understanding of Chekhov than went beyond the traditional readings of the author presented in the first chapter of this work: by returning again to the original and considering it alongside the sociohistorical background that surrounded it, the seemingly risky transplantation of the action from Russia to the Highlands turned the play into a revealing reflection of the region’s 1970s past and 2010’s future, all while respecting the original’s structure and usefulness to suggest social analysis through a myriad of poignant subjective perspectives. Also, and despite deep textual transformations, Chekhov’s mixture between irony and sensibility, between the oppressive present and the hope for a better future, survived in the actors’ speech rhythms, in the melancholy of the last side lighting crossing a prop window and touching Firs – Fintry’s body at the very end of the play. In a year where the *Draft Referendum (Scotland) Bill* was presented to the public, which two years later would lead to the creation of the failed 2014 Referendum, this re-creation of the play offered an intercultural exchange that never forgot the plastic expressivity and emotive richness of the original Russian work, while acting at the same time as a timely reminder of the challenges and

risks of political gestures of emancipation. Also, in its fierce political honesty it announced the appearance of many plays that in subsequent years dealt with the (ultimately rejected) proposition of Scottish independence: among them can be mentioned the Traverse Theatre's premier of *Spoiling* by John McCann, "set in a Scotland which has just voted for independence" where "a future Foreign Minister-designate who is unhappy with the financial settlement following the vote" (Dowd, 2014), or the one-man play by Chris Dolan *The Pitiless Storm*, starring David Hayman, which showed "a middle-aged Labour politician coming to support the notion of Scottish independence" (Dowd, 2014). Together, they proposed a contradictory picture of the future of the country: a picture whose first lines were drawn by the satirical-meditative Chekhovian rewriting attempted by John Byrne. Chekhov, then, served on this case as an inspiration to explore a world of cultural and aesthetic ambiguities, presenting multiple questions and leaving answers (and political decisions) to the spectators; the only undeniable fact was that a simplistic notion of national identity could not be embraced anymore, exchanged for a fluid notion that included different socio-political identities in a fluid process of communication.

3. Chekhovian femininity: Gate Theatre's *Vanya* (26 August – 26 September 2009)

Beyond the presentation of new regional definitions of identity, Chekhovian adaptations also explored other forms of 'otherness': even within England, and in the centric context of London, some productions redefined a traditional 'gender culture' to express rejuvenated understandings of 'Britishness'. The case of Sam Holcroft's *Vanya*, an adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* which was presented at the Gate Theatre between 26 August and 26 September 2009 (later on extended until 9 October of the same year due to its commercial success), was representative in the sense that it rewrote the original play by highlighting its female conflicts, pointing to the more active yet still

unstable position of women on British contemporary society. This was no doubt influenced by the facts that both the writer (the aforementioned Sam Holcroft) and the director (Natalie Abrahams) of the new version were women, and that the two female characters of the play occupied a central dramatic position. This does not mean, though, that the male figures of this “stripped-down, minimalist, modernised version” (Haydon, 2009) were irrelevant: in fact, their presence emphasised “Chekhov’s sexual conveyor belt as the main linking thread” (Fisher, 2009b), and their selfish or possessive attitudes (presented with unflinching intensity) revealed physical and psychological scars. In short, the production –as the next pages will develop– was a dark yet honest reconsideration of the original’s “relationships, as viewed through 21st century eyes” (Fisher, 2009b); by extension, it expressed the communicative challenges between genders in an evolving society where equality, and not subjugation, became a seminal structural core.

To further understand the claims extrapolated from the production, it is necessary to explore first the socio-cultural condition of British women at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Compared to the late 1960s, their position had improved considerably, especially when taking into consideration a series of measures implemented since the 1970s to diminish discrimination and the gender gap in the public sphere: some examples are the 1970 equal Pay Act, which “prohibited any less favourable treatment between men and women in terms of pay”, and the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, which “promoted equality and opportunity between men and women” (ONS, 2013). Also, a 2013 report by the Office for National Statistics revealed that the employment rate for women in the country had gone up from 53% in 1971 to 67% in 2013, implying a more comprehensive penetration of female figures within various working environments. However, as *The Independent* reported soon after these results were revealed, “experts cautioned (...) that this rise had coincided with an increase in the gender pay gap, as median wages for women fell. The increase was also largely created by more women declaring themselves self-employed, which could

mean many pocketing paltry sums far below the minimum wage” (Dungan, 2014). Added to this, a report created by the Centre for Women and Democracy on the same year, untitled *Sex and Power*, concluded that “progress towards parity in Britain’s democratic institutions was painfully slow”, with only “16 percent of Conservatives MPs (...), 32 percent of Labour MPs and 12 percent of Liberal Democrats” being women (CfWD, 2013: 5). Despite an empowerment of women as independent and recognised presences in many sections of society, then, even at the time *Vanya* premiered there was still a significant gender difference that hadn’t been completely confronted.

The world of early 21st century British drama was no exception to this situation. Historically, the position of women working in the field was not equal to those of their male counterparts: all the masterpieces of the English Renaissance were conceived by and played by men, and even after women were allowed on the stage in the winter of 1660-1 and some of them even became managers of their own companies, female playwrights met “resistance in ways that female performers did not (...) [and] never became a powerful presence” compared to the vast array of male creators (Lafler, 2004: 71). As Joann Lafler (2004: 89) developed, between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries “over thirty women managed to have their plays produced and a handful were successful. Yet their overall history was not one of growth and progress”. So, although “after 1660 there would always be a demand for actresses”, successive generations of female playwrights, “unable to build upon the achievement of their predecessors, struggled anew to claim authorial legitimacy”. This revealed that, although women were allowed to participate on the stage as interpreters of someone else’s (chiefly male) discourses¹²⁵, their own voices and perspectives were not truly listened within the dramatic world: the feminine ‘otherness’ was minimised and did not enter (despite the political

¹²⁵ Late 19th century actress Sarah Bernhardt even toured the country playing originally male roles, like in her iconic 1890 *Hamlet* production. However, she still was framed by Shakespeare’s dramatic text.

efforts presented at the beginning of this chapter) the theatrical discussions about the meaning and understanding of national identity.

As suggested above, during the first decades of the twentieth century this situation continued; even after the political achievements of the suffragette movement, it was still difficult for female playwrights to succeed on the stage. Thanks to the flourishing of “regional repertory theatre”, which relayed on “the support of a wealthy individual or the backing of a community of civic dignitaries” and was therefore “less commercially driven, and more receptive to new progressive drama”, playwrights such as Elizabeth Baker reached a moderate success (Aston & Reinelt, 2000: 7-8); meanwhile, former actresses achieved “careers on London’s commercial West End stages”, although “their writing was formally and ideologically conditioned by the ‘malestream’ of their theatrical and social lives” and “their dramatizations of women’s lives (...) were ‘diffuse and fragmented’” (Aston & Reinelt, 2000: 8).

It would be necessary to wait after World War II to see the appearance of dramatic discourses that confronted sexist and limited notions of social identity. In 1958, when the ‘Angry Young Men’ critical recognition was at its peak, Ann Jellicoe presented at the Royal Court *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, which through a mixture of realism, music and mysticism brought together “violence and birth in scenes that rel[ied] as much on movement and style as they [did] on the emotions (indeed often angry) by the central character Greta” (Bennett, 2000: 40): a powerful feminist claim that proposed both structural and thematic innovations to highlight the misogyny that existed not only within traditional forces but also inside ‘renovating’ discourses like those of the aforementioned Angry Young Men.¹²⁶ Also, plays such as Shelagh Delaney’s *A Taste of Honey*, premiered at the Royal Court

¹²⁶ Quoting Steven Lacey and his book *British Realist Theatre*, Susan Bennett illustrated how in *Look Back in Anger* –the most representative piece of this generation– lay a notion of class resentment that was “inseparable from an antagonism towards, and fear of, women” (Bennett, 2000: 39).

in May 1958 and then “transferred to the West End for another 368 performances”, explored “the moral and legal problems around the legitimate or illegitimate status of the child of a single mother, issues of domestic and child-care labour, the possibility of abortion, and the role or threat of homosexuality to the family unit” (Bennett, 2000: 41). In a few words, new understandings of gender cultures were presented, revealing how traditional and established discourses of motherhood, family and sexuality (among other themes) were insufficient to grasp the complexities faced by British citizens at that historical time. Drama, Delaney suggested, had the responsibility to avoid established conventions and explore points of view that had been previously side-lined from the stage.

This interest, as suggested previously in this thesis, eventually grew considerably larger from the late 1960s onwards; in the case of female playwrights this led to an increased presentation of plays written by some of them, although without still reaching parity with their male counterparts. As Michelene Wandor (2000: 53) wrote, the increase was helped by the interconnection of “a vigorous feminist movement” with “the rise of a new theatre movement, variously called ‘alternative’, ‘fringe’, or ‘political’, which exploded in the late 1960s and generated an energetic debate about the relationship between theatre, society, and politics”. This led to the appearance of theatrical troupes that explicitly celebrated new femininities and their positioning within society: in 1973, for example, the Almost Free Theatre in London “put on a season of plays by women writers (...), directed and stage-managed by women”, which led to the creation of The Women’s Theatre Group, “which combined some of the aims of the Theatre-in-Education movement with those of the adult touring groups”, and that “performed plays about abortion and contraception, about women’s position at work” (Wandor, 2000: 60). From this organisation, alongside others like Monstrous Regiment (founded in 1975), a generation of female writers emerged, led by recognised figures like Timberlake Wertenbaker and Caryl Churchill. Added to the economic support of the Arts Council to

fringe theatres throughout the 1970s, this created an inventive environment where female creators went beyond patriarchal notions that connected womanhood with privacy and homely attitudes, proposing instead political and historical plays that either advanced new readings of then current situations or reinterpreted important historical events. A new era of recognition and expansion for young female writers seemed to be around the corner, ready to embrace this specific otherness within the general theatrical discourse.

This expectation, however, did not fully materialize. Instead, from 1979 to 1997 the theatrical landscape took a different route: “with Thatcherism and a long period of Conservative government, individualism (...) [became] deeply entrenched in our [UK’s] social ideology” (Wandor, 2000: 63). Therefore, even though many women who had started their careers found recognition and economic success, the cutting of funds for “alternative, political, or experimental companies” led to a decline in feminist theatrical groups and the appearance of an “emphasis on financial self-sufficiency, corporate sponsorship, and business planning and marketing” (Aston & Reinelt, 2000: 15). Ironically, at a time when economic and political policies were controlled by a female Prime Minister, a desire for the patriarchal family as the centre of social identity (as opposed to other, less heteronormative, notions of identity) acquired a renovated importance; even with the arrival of New Labour in 1997 and the return of some elements of the (considerably dismantled) welfare system and its support for the arts, there was not any real attempt to change a series of rules which connected the notion of national identity with individual economic success.¹²⁷ Consequently, by the first decade of the 21st century (the period when *Vanya*’s author Sam Holcroft premiered her first plays), although feminism retained a symbolic and theoretical importance, it had lost within the world of drama the capacity “to support women’s writing – providing venues, audiences, performers

¹²⁷ The individual success of certain writers like Sarah Kane notwithstanding, the end of the 20th century continued the trend of individual success over a collective reinforcing of plays written by women.

and issues for dramatization” (Aston & Reinelt, 2000: 17). Not that the number of women working in the field diminished during these years: as director Lucy Kerbel explained to journalist Rosamund Erwin after the publication of her book *100 Great Plays for Women*, “more women study drama at school and university, and more buy theatre tickets. Yet female life is under-represented” (Urwin, 2013). The possibilities presented by womanhood, with all of its intimate and socio-political ramifications, was then left considerably unexplored, unpublished or un-staged in the UK at this time. Even with the appearance of “a new wave of female directors including Lyndsey Turner and Polly Findlay, and playwrights such as Polly Stenham and Anya Reiss” there were distribution and recognition problems: “we’ve seen a wave of young female writers before but they haven’t moved on to the next step —from small studio spaces to main stages— like their male counterparts” (Urwin, 2013). Ultimately, in the world of British drama circa 2010, the ideal of creative equality between male and female playwrights had still not been reached; as it happened in the society at large, more specifically with its notions of national identity, the stage had not fully embraced yet the interpretative possibilities offered by female ‘otherness’.

As mentioned above, Sam Holcroft’s work must be understood within this frame of contradictions and challenges. Her *Uncle Vanya*’s adaptation was presented at the Gate Theatre, a small off-West End space where despite an extended season it never reached the audience numbers of bigger and more commercialised theatres. Nevertheless, these limitations cannot deny the historical importance of the venue: since its original opening by Peter Godfrey in 1925 in a Covent House warehouse, and after its 1979 reestablishment in Notting Hill thanks to the efforts of then artistic director Lou Stein, the reduced venue has been for years an ideal space of experimentation. Indeed, important theatrical figures of the twentieth and early twentieth-first century British theatre were connected to the company, whether as artistic directors (Stephen Daldry), independent directors (Rufus Norris) or commissioned playwrights (Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill). As the history section

of the theatre's website suggested, there was an interest in being "a home for anarchic spirits, invigorating theatre, and restless creative ambition. We welcome anyone who wants to change the world" (Gate Theatre, 2014). To this self-aggrandizing description, though, it should be added the reality of the venue's dependence on foundations and national funds. Starting at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the company was awarded a rising flow of money, from £254.000 given by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Breakthrough Fund in 2009 (Baluch, 2009) to the annual Arts Council funding that reached £319,671 in the 2014-2015 season (Arts Council, n.d.): this revealed, once more, the importance of private and governmental sponsorships in the creation of new dramatic material (even when dealing with self-defined 'anarchic' creators), while at the same time highlighting the growing relevance of the Gate as part of the economic-cultural environment.

Another revealing element was mentioned by the Arts Council itself (n.d.): "The Gate Theatre specialises in international work, including new plays and new work in translation". Indeed, since its original appearance this particular stage "made it a matter of policy consistently to bring innovative Europeans before English audiences" (Trussler, 2000: 288), going against other more traditional companies and showing a desire for innovation that, eventually, led to the presentation of contemporary local works. This last decision, still in action at the time of Holcroft's *Vanya* presentation, implied a defence of notions of intercultural communication and exchange in a context of immigration and criticism (from some quarters) of the influence of international forces within the UK; the coexistence of many cultural forces led to a globalizing attitude within this company, as well as a creative intermingling between shows of different origins. The 2009-2010 season, entitled 'Generation Gate' and structured around the 30th anniversary of the reopening of the venue, was a good example: just before the presentation of *Vanya* three highly contrasting shows were premiered. They were Spanish playwright Juan Mayorga's *Nocturnal*, an exploration of "the complex nature of friendship, stripping away to reveal the layers of polite behaviour to reveal

the power struggles beneath human relationships”; *Medea/Medea* by Dylan Tighe, a new version of Euripides’ tragedy that blended “live performance with pre-recorded image” and investigated “the nature of translation, the concept of theatre and the place of myth in modern society”; and *Press* by Pierre Rigal, a French choreography that enquired “how our personal space is confined by the pressures of modern life” (Bacalzo, 2009). The heterogeneous mixture revealed a series of common threads, based on a more fluid communication between text and image, a reinterpretation of traditional stories and symbols in a contemporary context, and a conscious and gender-based exploration of human relationships: factors that, as it will be seen below, would find a place in Sam Holcroft’s Chekhovian creation.

Adding to the more exploratory quality of the venue, and emphasising the gender qualities of the production analysed here, it must be mentioned that the artistic directors at the time of the performance of the Chekhov rewriting –one of whom was also its director– were two women: Natalie Abrahami and Carrie Cracknell. Their leadership was unique in the sense of being the first joint leadership in the history of the company and because it followed the steps of the previous artistic director, Thea Sharrock, who had directed “acclaimed productions of *Tshepang*, *Tejas Verdes* and *The Emperor Jones*”, and supervised Daniel Kramer’s production of the Gate’s “first-ever-musical, a reinvention of *Hair*” (Watsonstage, 2006). As Abrahami herself pointed out in an interview given to *The Guardian* soon after her appointment, “Carrie Cracknell and I knew we wanted to work together. Maybe that desire to collaborate is a female thing. We knew it was a risk to apply as a pair, but it worked” (Gardner, 2007). According to her, it was not surprising that the venue continued the trend of choosing female artistic directors: “the Gate (...) is a place for emerging artists and is therefore probably more in tune with the idea of rising young female directors. It is prepared to take risks” (Gardner, 2007). For her colleague in the post, their position was also an opportunity to change certain conventions deeply rooted within the drama world: “Men have

always called the shots in British theatre; it must have an effect on what is seen on our stages. It's time we women got a little more angry and petulant. If we do not like what we see, we should do something about it. But it is happening, and it is not just to do with theatre, but with the fact that, generally, women in society feel more able to express their opinions and take control of their lives" (Gardener, 2007). Unsurprisingly, following this strong stand on theatrical renewal, the next four years of these two artists' tenure marked a strengthening of the most experimental trends that the theatre had always relied on: as Terri Paddock described when their farewell season was announced in 2011, "Cracknell and Abrahams (...) built on the Gate's reputation for promoting international theatre, while also reinterpreting classic plays and expanding into more physical and dance-driven theatre, epitomised by a partnership with Sadler's Wells which has seen annual transfers of their work to the dance centre in Islington" (Paddock, 2011). In this context, the staging of a reinvention of *Uncle Vanya*, which mixed a new text with a highly visual approach, fitted well within these aesthetic perspectives encouraged by the venue; a view that, in its diversity, aimed for a wider social understanding between different members of society.

Sam Holcroft's role as the adapter of Chekhov added an extra layer to these notions. At the time she decided to write her version, she already had a successful career as a playwright behind her: "educated at Edinburgh University" in Developmental Biology, she left the prospect of a career as a researcher of "the physiological and genetic control of stem cell production and differentiation" (Windham Campbell, 2014), became "a member of the Traverse Theatre's Young Writer's Group from 2003 – 2005", and in "2005/6 was nominated by the Traverse Theatre as part of THE FIFTY to mentor 50 emerging playwrights for the Royal Court Theatre and BBC Writers Room" (Casarotto, 2013). The results of these achievements were the creation of a series of short dramatic works, such as *London Street Sauna*, a 2006 exploration of the connections between a brother, a sister and a common friend in the context of contemporary Edinburgh, and *Ned & Sharon*, "a story of love and

tenderness about a troubled teenager in a care home” (Doollee, n.d. b): in both of them Holcroft showed a skill in capturing the contradictions of inter-family and inter-generational relationships, through the use of a writing style characterised by its staccatos and almost clinical precision. Also, they indicated once more the importance of Scotland as a space full of dramatic potentialities: by fusing a geographic and a gender-based ‘otherness’, Holcroft embodied a generation of playwrights who through their work proposed fresh perspectives of national identity, originated from what was before regarded as the ‘periphery’ of an England or London-based dramaturgy.

But the most important precedent to *Vanya* came in 2008 with the presentation of Holcroft’s first full length play, *Cockroach*, “a smart, witty play about the extremes created by the scenario of war as well as by our internal biological makeup” (Jackson, 2008), where the seemingly simple story of a group of students kept in detention by a biology teacher was progressively darkened due to the existence of an undefined war outside the classroom that forced all the male characters to leave – called up to fight– and the female protagonists to confront an increased isolation and destruction of social structures. Through this, the playwright created an ambitious artistic construction that mixed Darwinian theories of evolution and natural selection with a socio-political exploration of human excesses and brutality; as Mark Fisher (2008) from *The Guardian* suggested, the implication was that “the violence in our society, from rape to genital mutilation, is a consequence of our pre-programmed need to ensure the survival of the fittest”. Also, the dominating presence of female characters served to reinterpret womanly intimacy as propelled by biological, sexual and emotional urges; as it happened in *Vanya*’s case, their conversations and monologues avoided a delicate or intimate style, as well as any gender-based solidarity. Instead, the dramatic space became “a radical feminist answer to *Lord of the Flies*” (Fisher, M., 2008), using the four female figures to explore different shades of human relationships, from overt rebellion to teenage reticence, and later

expressing their futility due to the power of animalistic instincts emboldened by discourses such as the honour of war, the cult of sexuality or the validity of the macho culture.

Although dealing with a less dystopic story (which respected Chekhov's original play), *Vanya* continued these feminist explorations. First of all, the title's simplification to just one word revealed a stylistic choice: a sharper and more concise style, where fast conversations were interspersed with soliloquies that revealed in a stream of consciousness the internal struggles of the characters. Adding to this, this "bold remix" did away "with half of Chekhov's eight named roles, in order to magnify our attention to the experiences of the remaining four", that is, Sonya, Vanya, Yelena and Astrov (Hitchings, 2009): through a series of short, brisk scenes, the play relied on subtexts, an economic presentation of the conflicts and an insinuation of external forces. Although completely excised from the stage, and never referred by name but only as a 'doctor', the figure of Serebryakov became "a vividly felt offstage presence" whose power was increased due to his constant mention in other characters' dialogues (Best, 2009); the myriad of perspectives regarding his personality, connected to the lack of interest towards his daughter Sonya or the use of his non-specified illness as a weapon over his wife Yelena and Vanya, finally led to an understanding of the character as a psychologically oppressive figure and as part of a wider social context which still cherished dominant male discourses. As Michael Billington referred in his review, Holcroft offered "a feminist slant on our gift for emotional failure" (Billington, 2009): through the emotional interconnections and disappointments of four characters, the show indicated how both men and women in contemporary societies, as filtered through Chekhov's characters and their re-interpretation by a female writer, existed within a framework of restricting chauvinistic expectations.

In fact, each of the main male figures –whether present or implied– reflected a contradictory understanding of 'masculinity' behind a façade of politeness or ideological expectations. The unseen

doctor, mainly because of his invisibility, triggered the conflicts of the other individuals while at the same time embodying a conservative view of manhood and society: one where the male was the supposed centre of the family, positioned to take all intellectual decisions, asking for obedience and allowing women like Yelena “to be beautiful but nothing else” in life (Berkowitz, 2009). The opposition between his old age and the youth of his second wife, already present in the original, was emphasised through other characters’ dialogues, who underlined the dated qualities of his discourse while highlighting the power it still held over younger generations: a force that, through the manipulation created by his physical weakness, created despair among the house members despite their almost unanimous disapproval of his actions. In a wider social sense this attitude, and the implications it had for the female characters, metaphorically conveyed the lasting influence of discourses where womanhood was still considered a subordinate force to the emotional and physical satisfaction of masculinity.

Not only this blatantly sexist attitude was explored; other subtler expressions of control were scrutinized through the character of Astrov, who was transformed from “an ecological idealist whose passion for preserving the forests” in Chekhov’s original to “a social anthropologist who preache[d] the need to return to ‘the harmony of tribal living’ while disrupting the family in front of him” (Billington, 2009c). Indeed, when first introduced in a conversation with Sonya that comprised the entirety of the fourth scene, the character presented himself as a critic of the alienation of contemporary urban societies and as an “eco-campaigner with his talk of ‘squandering our resources’ and veneration of ant societies” (Haydon, 2009); in other words, he claimed to pursue the reinforcement of society as a collective endeavour and not only as a sum of indifferent individual voices. From an affective and gendered perspective, his sociological proposal pointed too towards a less animalistic progression, where both sides were not supposed to be attracted to each other because of their physical beauty or sexual pulsations but exclusively due to their intellectual

attributes, leading to the reconstitution of love as a rational endeavour and the dismissal of the battle of the sexes in favour of a common moral understanding. Unsurprisingly, Sonya, as a young woman blinded by her affection for the doctor, reacted with fervour to these theories and even announced that “it does not matter that I’m not beautiful, intelligent or visionary, because what I offer you is yourself, born through me, and you are all of those things” (Holcroft, 2009: 22). Her relationship with Astrov, then, aimed to transcend an individual quality and reach an allegoric value that reflected the construction of a better society, a utopia where reason would allow a union between sides previously separated due to primitive impulses.

In this surrender to the charms and ideologies of the Other, however, rested an implied element of subordination that, through the austerity of Holcroft’s writing, revealed a reality eventually expressed in the play: Astrov’s complete hypocrisy, who through his actions did the exact opposite of what his ideas suggested. Many elements indicated this, starting with his wittering on “about our responsibility to each other while seducing Yelena and ignoring Sonya’s uncomplicated love” (Billington, 2009), and perhaps more importantly his selfish pursuit of satisfaction over the happiness and stability of the household where he had been originally invited (in an ironic twist) as a health-giver. His libertarian discourse, in fact, was unmasked by the events as a weapon of masculine control over the two female figures of the house: in a striking scene where he was apparently only trying to teach Yelena how “to administer morphine to her husband, getting her to practice by injecting a needle full of saline into his own arm”, the first implication was that of “a powerfully erotic scene of mutual seduction” (Best, 2009), but further layers of meaning (expressed through pauses and suggestive dialogues) revealed the doctor’s clinical and totally self-centred notion of love. Meanwhile, Sonya’s case was even more painful: infatuated by his discourses, her original hope for a better future was eventually broken by the discovery of Yelena’s seduction and her understanding of his manipulative attitudes. The end of the story, which just as the original work

was focused in a scene between Vanya and Sonya where they both recognised hard work as the only escape to the vicissitudes and disappointments of life, acquired a darker meaning due to the masculine oppression executed by the 'progressive' doctor; real love and communal communication became an impossibility in an universe where characters "begin alone, together", and "end alone, together", almost like "the heads in Beckett's *Play*, cyclical and doomed to keep repeating their tragedy every time the play is read or performed" (Haydon, 2009).

From a socio-political perspective, Astrov's discourse also revealed a duplicity that can be read as a critique of the most conservative notions of national identity: one based on the return to a 'purer' and communal past, but actually interested in an "espousal of eugenics" where the discourses of a few were the true centre of society (Billington, 2009c). Cultural variety or diversity of opinions were dismissed in favour of a monolithic force that served only the selfish purposes of a small community to which figures like Astrov belonged; taking into consideration his constant references to abstract social constructions, his flaws transcended his individuality and ended up symbolizing a general social scenario that, in its disastrous results, demonstrated the negative consequences of supporting an almost fascistic perspective disguised by a mask of utopic social improvement. Also, it indirectly advocated the restructuring of established gender cultures in order to reveal more fluid notions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity', where the former could be allowed to build a more plural and balanced identity, and the later could avoid a series of social entrapments that they themselves were victims of.

The social disempowerment of those males that did not fit established 'rules' of masculinity, in fact, was represented in the play through another figure: Vanya, a pathetic character who, just like Sonya, sacrificed many years of his life for 'superior' males like the intellectual Serebryakov, only to discover with horror "the emptiness and pointlessness of his own life" (Shuttleworth, 2009). The irony of it all

was that, out of all the males presented in the story, Vanya was the one who demonstrated “a lacerating self-pity with, as it should be, *almost* enough recognition of the absurdity of his position” (Shuttleworth, 2009): a childish, melodramatic and impulsive individual, who nevertheless had the skill to see through the fabrications of Astrov’s discourses and the frustrations of Yelena’s marriage. So, although it cannot be ignored his failed attempts at seducing Yelena, or his tragicomic effort to kill with morphine the man he believed to be the cause of all his problems, throughout the play Vanya seemed like a man pressured to fit a definition of manhood that castrated his true emotional sensibilities. In a social environment of bravado and arrogance, his self-sacrificing attitude led to a destruction of independence where “evaporating energies and hopes” ended up in an eventual acceptance of “the grisly, pointless ennui of it all” (Coveney, 2009b). Also, due to the symbolic value of the story, his failure became another subtle critique of gender constructions based on the imposition of immovable discourses, which led to alienation and general disappointment.

Similar shades were found in the female characters; Holcroft, in fact, drew “attention more to the women than the men”, creating creatures with their “pain of loving” and hopes to be loved (Berkowitz, 2009). Besides her infatuation with Astrov, the character of Sonya –just like in the original version– possessed a determined nature, anxious to live and learn about the world around her; her final disappointment turned her into “a truly Chekhovian character, the small person whose small tragedy we are forced to recognise as real and worthy of our concern” (Berkowitz, 2009), while at the same time reinforcing her individual strength through her decision to move forward and endure despite all the disappointments, until an imprecise moment (left ambiguous so the spectator could choose between redemption or death) where something “will wrap itself around us with warmth and light and take us into a very deep and rolling peace” (Holcroft, 2009: 54). Meanwhile, Yelena presented complementary angles, playing a frustrated yet committed wife in the middle of an unhappy marriage, a tentative lover who recognised the weakness of her potential male partner

and despaired between her two possible affections, and a woman who struggled to become a responsible mother –and not just a distant step-mother– of Sonya. In their opposition, as well as in the scenes they shared together, there was a richness of feeling that might have reached a higher level had it not been for the social discourses that forced them to lead a meaningless life of “dead-at-night-despair, disastrous eavesdropping, sexual discussion of pheromones and evolution, (...) and morphine injections” (Coveney, 2009b). Their potential as generators of connections and intergenerational understandings was undermined by a political-intimate control that stifled their attempts to build independent futures and led them instead towards claustrophobic sexual obsession and emotional dissatisfaction.

Natalie Abrahami’s direction also emphasised the themes present in Holcroft’s writing. The performances from the entire cast were intense and focused, expressing a glimpse of the female characters’ independence and strength despite their submission, and revealing the hypocrisy, passive-aggressive attitudes or direct physical weaknesses of the men on and off-stage. Also, the set design –done by Abrahami in collaboration with Tom Scott– served as a visual metaphor of the psychological and social entrapments implied by the plot: described as an “industrial packing case (...) behind a traditional proscenium”, it changed with great flexibility from scene to scene, “revolving [and] changing its nature to fit the creative team’s vision”, expressing with the help of the “atmospheric (...) and thoughtful lighting courtesy of Mark Howland” and the transformations created by the actors themselves an expressionist world where windows, increasingly smaller spaces and nightmarish corners highlighted the emotional shades of the four characters (Fisher, 2009b). Ultimately, the size of the Gate was used very effectively, adding a claustrophobic edge that exalted the socio-political subtexts of the play by physically suggesting the way they prevented the establishment of emotional bonds, as well as a balanced understanding between male and female characters. Gender culture became then another arena for social confrontation; and the

entrapment experienced by actors and audiences symbolised the geographic entrapment of the UK as an island, as well as the subjugation still experienced by women in the 'progressive' context of contemporary society.

One of the greatest achievements of the whole endeavour, in fact, was the way it used Chekhov to vindicate young feminist voices as important parts of British national identity, retaining "the skeleton of character, relationships and events", and proceeding "to tell the same story in her own way and to her own ends" without ever disrespecting the original (Shuttleworth, 2009). In fact, with the exception of Astrov, and despite the rewriting of the entirety of the dialogues, the rest of the characters preserved a similarity to the ones ideated by Chekhov: despite the change of eras, location and language, the Russian author proved to be a powerful presence in the writing of younger generations of British playwrights. Even though, due to the Spartan quality of the revision, the lack of supporting characters and the description of Astrov as a complete hypocrite, the text did not always have the musical and ambiguous nature of the original, the new version worked as a chamber piece that pointed out an element proper of Chekhovian dramaturgy: its capacity to express in a subdued fashion the emotional frustrations and dissatisfactions of a group of people. The message was this time reinforced to indicate women's isolation and the way they were forced to follow a gender culture that some men also found unbearable, fortifying the original's defence of the unheard voices of everyday life; women, Sam Holcroft's adaptation emphasised, were also human beings, and in their resilience lie a force that, for the development of a varied society, should be heard in order to blur the breach between the 'otherness' of the genders and turn it into a celebration of diversity.

4. Conclusion

Both *The Cherry Orchard* and *Vanya*, as rewritings of the original plays done by British playwrights, had a similar goal, based on the implicit understanding that previously ‘hidden’ or underexplored voices had to be taken into the foreground in order to offer new perspectives of national identity. Indeed, these shows adopted through their written transformations and staging an approach that, without changing the structure or all of Chekhov’s characters, offered enough renovation to express the complexity of the British contemporary nation, far away from a traditional view based on a monolithic cultural discourse. Here, instead, a complex universe unfolded, presenting on the first case a historical contextualisation of the tensions that made Scotland see English rule with increasing suspicion and led it to a road that, at the time of the presentation of the show, was shaping up to what was later known as the failed 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum. Meanwhile, in the second case a nightmarish, claustrophobic and nearly dystopian universe served as a metaphor of the contradictions that existed on British gender culture, pointing out to the control still exerted by male forces and the oppression of female characters through different methods –from open subjugation to a subtler conquest through deceitful intellectual and progressive ideologies. In a few words, the *status quo* of traditional interpretations was challenged, proposing instead an enriching (if troubling) scope of the political and cultural varieties present in early 21st century UK.

But perhaps the most important achievement of these rewritten versions of Chekhov’s plays done by John Byrne and Sam Holcroft is that, through the aesthetic sublimation of the abovementioned issues and their presentation in a clear and poetic manner, they served as a thoughtful meditation on the need to confront social inequalities and tensions and dialogue in order to find a more including notion of national identity. Despite the fact that both of them –especially the one

presented at the Gate Theatre— did not reach the same number of audiences than the West End-centred productions analysed in previous chapters (therefore limiting the reach of the valuable interpretations they were proposing), it is certain that they conveyed a message of vindication; considering both the local importance of the Lyceum Theatre and the female-dominated cast and crew of the Gate production, it could be said that both creations served as self-empowering and self-reflective structures for those ‘other’ voices that had been silenced, presenting unseen forms of control over them and recognising their identity in a context of volatilization and heterogeneity. Not that this excluded other forces; in the sensitive rendition of Scottish fallibilities, as well as the oppression felt by men in the hands of sexist discourses, the plays showed also the necessity of self-criticism and the importance of intercultural communication between different discourses in order to produce a more encompassing and fulfilling society. All contradictions were not supposed then to be solved with total isolation from both parties, that is, with an absolute separation of Scotland from the rest of the UK or the rejection of all men on the basis of their inherited social control; instead, the proposal was to establish a meaningful dialogue where all sides could build and fight for a peaceful future.

To conclude, it must be remembered that Chekhov’s dramatic style was still recognisable after the rewriting process: as it was said before, his plot construction and preference for subtexts was not touched by the British adapters, revealing how it served as a framework to pose new issues without violating the plurality of the characters. Also, both theatrical events showed the degree of reinterpretations the Russian author continued to have at the end of the first decade of the 21st century inside the UK: going beyond a translation of the originals, he served as an inspiration for contemporary authors to discuss relevant themes connected to their own political and gendered idiosyncrasies. In fact, it went even beyond that, escaping the realm of adaptations and rewritings: as the next chapter will show, he and his works also served as inspirations for other works that

continued in a more experimental fashion the exploration of the necessity of intercultural exchange within the country.

Chapter Four: progressive and intercultural national identities presented through British productions inspired by Chekhov

1. Introduction

Inspired by Chekhovian dramaturgy's flexibility to explore socio-political affairs and varied notions of British national identity, some local artists not only attempted a fresh directorial approach or a general rewriting of one of Chekhov's plays (as was the case with the productions analysed so far), but also reconsidered the dramas *and* the autobiographic-aesthetic legacy of the Russian author to produce independent works that showcased once more his social relevance in the UK's theatrical universe. Drawing on J. Douglas Clayton and Dana Meerzon's (2013: 10) ideas, it can be argued that these shows could be seen as a "radical (...) or performative mutation, when an original dramatic text is transformed into the performance text of a theatrical event, or even a film": taking the original written dramas as *inspirations*, they created new works with visual and politically charged elements that positioned Chekhov inside specific social and historical environments, and presented intertheatrical and intercultural approximations of the stage and the country at large.

In order to explore their progressive understandings of British identity, the present chapter will draw upon and reflect on two productions: Dan Rebellato's play *Chekhov in Hell*, produced by the Drum Theatre, Plymouth, in late 2010 and then presented between April and May 2011 at the Soho Theatre in London; and dreamthinkspeak's version of *The Cherry Orchard*, a "promenade show" that served as a "centrepiece of the Brighton Festival" in 2010 (Maxwell, 2010). Positioned in a contemporary and changing cultural context, and overtly recognising 'otherness' and the fluid qualities of diversity, these shows deconstructed 'characteristic' elements of Chekhovian

dramaturgy and used them to discuss topics such as the disappearance of the cooperative culture, the challenges of intercultural processes and the contradictions of megalopolis like London. The notion of inspiration, then, should be understood here not as a superficial reutilisation of the Russian author's stylistic choices, but more as an elaborate dialogue between his dramas and 21st century creators who reinterpreted, appropriated and transformed his ideological and socio-politic structures. This was already suggested, of course, in all the shows analysed so far in this work: in their position as part of a sequence of Chekhovian productions within the UK, they were inserted within historically traceable discourses. Sam Holcroft's *Vanya* and John Byrne's *The Cherry Orchard*, for example, went as far as to propose radical reinterpretations based on a complete rewriting of the original; but even in these cases Chekhov's plots, characters and general denouements were preserved, and were promoted and received by the press as quasi-Chekhovian dramas. The two productions scrutinised below were presented instead as completely new shows that paid homage to the Russian writer by using Chekhovian elements: a claim that, however, has to be put in the context of a "fabric of (...) memory, shared by audience and players", where "the night in the theatre is a point of crystallization in a continuously moving, dissolving and re-forming pattern" (Bratton, 2003: 38), and that in these cases accentuated Chekhov as a reinterpreted creator and individual symbol. Ultimately, this revealed with more clarity the aesthetic and political manners in which his work and life, that Chekhovian personality and style, were re-signified by British dramatic creators.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Not only Chekhov was subjected to this; as mentioned in the Introduction, Ibsen's dramas also went through British processes of assimilation and reinterpretation. In 2010 and 2011 (the years when the two Chekhovian productions analysed in this chapter were presented), there were some rewritings of the Norwegian playwright, such as the "radical makeover" of *The Master Builder* at the Almeida Theatre, a modern-dress production with an expressionistic set that transformed the play into a "propulsive dream, (...) [a] phantasmagoria" of psycho-sexual undertones that took spectators into the mind of the protagonist, "a hollow-eyed, despairing figure craving punishment for his past cruelty, exploitation of others and dark lusts" (Billington, 2010b); or, going further, Theatre Delicatessen's deconstruction of *A Doll's House*, which updated

The difference between the previous chapters' shows and the two analysed here also lies in the fact that *Chekhov in Hell* and *Before I Sleep* turned intertheatricality into a central and openly recognized element of their dramatic development, connecting past and current theatrical discourses. Dan Rebellato, in a *Guardian* article entitled *Chekhov's genius will always elude us*, wrote about his "hubristic impulse (...) to rewrite this man and his work", comparing his own play with other adaptations and works inspired by the Russian author, and concluding that for him his predecessor "continues to be an important model" because of his "authorial blankness, not of style but of commentary (...); the dark, dark irony and pitiless gaze that make him truly our contemporary" (Rebellato, 2010b). Meanwhile, in the programme of *Before I sleep*, dreamthinkspeak pointed out how their show was "not a version of *The Cherry Orchard*, but a new creation inspired by Chekhov's work. Nevertheless, fans of the play may find parallels with our production, including key themes, specific details and even characters that crop up at unexpected moments" (dreamthinkspeak, 2010: 1). In both cases there was an acknowledgment of the "collaboration in the creation of a particular theatrical experience" (Bratton, 2003: 38), where the original inspirer (Chekhov) was at the same time recognised and criticised, as well as re-constructed through new angles and historical perspectives. Also, the re-creation was specifically positioned inside a cultural and political context: Rebellato remarked how he woke up Chekhov (as some sort of character-author-symbol) "from a 100-year coma" and made him take a symbolically representative tour of London, "from lap dancing to reality TV, feng shui to Twitter" (Rebellato, 2010b), while dreamthinkspeak emphasised the

the story with an "all-female cast", "staging the piece on a catwalk" and proposing visual interludes of "women bound and corseted, as if being groomed to take on a predefined role" (Gardner, 2011), in order to present contemporary subjugations of women through fashion and self-punishment. Both of them indicated how Ibsen served, just as Chekhov, as a platform for new aesthetic and ideological perspectives; the difference lay (excepting some, more traditional, interpretations of the anti-populist play *An Enemy of the People*) in the greater emphasis given in these shows to a socio-political rather than psychological angle, more specifically that of the collapse of imperial notions of identity and the blossoming of other social discourses – themes that the Russian writer had already explored when dealing with a pre-revolutionary Russia, and that partly explained the impact of his work within the UK.

importance of the location of their production, an abandoned “Co-op [building] in London Road [that] was central to the local [Brighton’s] community, both as an engine of the economy and as a reliable outlet that neighbouring people could rely on for services and goods at affordable prices” (dreamthinkspeak, 2010: 2). As seen below, these ‘external’ elements became central in the thematic and emotional development of the productions, underscoring socio-political ideas: following Fredric Jameson, they “recognised that there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed, that everything is ‘in the last analysis’ political (...), unmasking cultural artefacts as socially symbolic acts”, and therefore taking the “political unconscious” of every show to the foreground (Jameson, 2013: 5). Within a context of cultural diversity, the intertheatrical was linked with the intercultural: accepting their position as the result of a palimpsest of voices and aesthetic heritages, both productions embraced a reading of British national identity that documented social nostalgia while being fascinated by cultural variety, identifying then the necessity to establish meaningful exchanges between traditional and progressive discourses.

Of course, these works were not the first ones based on the Russian playwright: before going into an individual analysis of each one of them, it is necessary to add to the story of Chekhovian productions in the UK a view of those local playwrights who claimed to be inspired by Chekhov¹²⁹; this will not only contextualise once more the Russian author’s influence within a wider historical context, but also allow a more elaborate understanding on how his plays influenced aesthetic styles and interpretative views of creators at different stages of Britain’s theatrical and national development. George Bernard Shaw’s case was already presented: beyond his vigorous (and initially unsuccessful) attempts to introduce the Russian writer within London’s theatrical circles, it must be highlighted here too how some of his own plays were touched by “these intensely Russian plays”

¹²⁹ Specific political elements, essential for the understanding of each show, will be analysed below.

which in his opinion “fitted all the country houses in Europe in which the pleasures of music, art, literature, and the theatre had supplanted hunting, shooting, fishing, eating, and drinking. The same nice people, the same utter futility” (quoted by Obratzova, 1993: 44). His play *Heartbreak House*, written during World War I, was subtitled *A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes*: in it, through his recognisable tragicomic style, the Irish playwright explored the collapse of a family’s status, establishing –as Anna Obratzova (1993: 43) wrote– a connection “between the Russian ‘cherry orchards’ and the English ‘gardens’ and ‘estates’ of the post-Victorian period which by the turn of the century were already beginning to crumble”. Also, influenced by his own gloom and pessimism over the future of Europe, Shaw emphasised some of the fatalistic traits of Chekhov’s plays, constructing his characters with the already mentioned lack of “faith in these charming people extricating themselves” that he believed to have seen in the Russian author (Shaw, 2011); and, just as his predecessor had preferred not to bring black and white villains and heroes into his plays but a mixture of many flawed characters, Shaw explained in 1928 that “the question which makes a play interesting (...) is [to wonder] which is the villain and which the hero” (quoted by Obratzova, 1993: 45). It was, in summary, a fertile reading that, rather than trying to slavishly imitate the previous foreign author, used some of his valuable elements and gave them a fresh turn. It was just the first of many processes of artistic influence that would happen in UK from 1919 onwards.

Among the creators of the interwar generation, it can also be remembered the figure of Terence Rattigan, explored in the first chapter of this work and who in many ways was influenced by the emotional complexities of the Russian author. In an interview that he gave in 1962 to the *Theatre Arts Magazine*, the English writer “told John Simon that playwrights were born Ibsenites or Chekhovians and that he was the former longing to be the latter”: beyond imitating Ibsen in the reshaping of the “well-made play to his own ends, imbuing it with psychological complexity and moral passion”, “like Chekhov, Rattigan focused on the personal problems of predominantly middle-

class characters who are left with no neat solutions; his comedies end with a respite instead of a celebration; his dramas, with a delicate balance of losses and gains” (Northen Magill, 1994: 1950). In other words, despite a structural base more connected to Ibsen, the author of *The Deep Blue Sea* was heavily influenced by his Russian predecessor’s affection towards emotional subtexts and dramatic subtlety. At the same time, it is important to recall how Rattigan eventually came to be considered in the late 1950s “a little fusty, an old-fashioned purveyor of emotional dramas” (Crompton, 2011)¹³⁰: the fact that he reworked a Chekhovian style that had originally represented a progressive and ground-breaking perspective in Russia, transforming it into an approach that first achieved widespread recognition and later on was criticised as ‘old-fashioned’ and characteristic of West End conventions, reveals once more how by the end of the 1930s *The Cherry Orchard*’s creator had been assimilated by London’s theatrical circles as a representative of a traditional style, who could inspire works that possessed ‘similar’ aesthetic achievements.

This does not mean, however, that Chekhov’s works were only connected to nostalgic artistic discourses; with the arrival of the 1960s, and the empowerment of varied cultural forces, new generations of authors discovered in the Russian author a mentor and an inspiration. This chapter does not aspire to mention all of them in detail, but as the many personal commentaries and articles published during the 150th anniversary of his birth can testify (alongside other declarations given at different occasions), it includes a widespread number of playwrights with different aesthetic tendencies. Harold Pinter’s connection with the Russian author, for example, has been mentioned on different occasions: as Ronald Knowles (2009: 78) wrote, “each uses comedy to pre-empt the audience from slipping into a consolatory emotional response of pathos and sentiment”, and for

¹³⁰ Many of these criticisms came from generations who had their own biases and interests in presenting Rattigan as a conservative creator. However, it cannot be denied that his style’s acceptance for nearly twenty years made him a member of London’s traditional dramatic circles.

both “the most profound expression of feeling is through silence, as at the close of *Uncle Vanya* and *The Caretaker*”. The ‘comedy of menace’ and the exploration of psycho-social methods of oppression developed by *The Caretaker*’s author were then not only influenced by the bleak Beckettian atmospheres (unthinkable themselves without the impact of Chekhovian and Maeterlinckean innovations), but also by the pauses and socio-politic ambiguities present in plays such as *Three Sisters* or the third and final version of *On the Harmful Effects on Tobacco*.

Alongside this, a similar connection (although with different results) could be claimed in relation with other authors: in his book *Understanding Alan Bennett*, Peter Wolff pointed out how “like Chekhov, [Bennett] aims, in his work, for a smooth, even texture rather than a series of dramatic crescendos. (...) Many of his characters occupy themselves with maintaining a façade, fighting boredom, and filling up idle hours” (Wolfe, 1999: 5): a play like *The Habit of Art*, in its simplicity of plot and exploration of opposite artistic trends within Britain’s social context, echoed *The Seagull*’s discussions about the meaning and future of dramatic art in a context of social transformation. Also, Alan Ayckbourn chose Chekhov as his favourite hero, saying “I admire Chekhov for his plays, his brevity, seldom wasting a word, and for his accuracy of human observation. He’s absolutely right. There is nothing *really* important that can’t be said in a few words or drawn with a few lines – certainly nothing that can’t fit on the single side of a postcard” (Cassidi, 2008: 10). Meanwhile, Timberlake Wertenbaker said “I love Chekhov, and although it is not obvious, he has influenced me very much”, to the point of writing a companion piece to *Three Sisters* called *The Break of Day* (1995), “played in real time and a single locale, with little action and much conversation, during which everyone becomes increasingly melancholy”, and that by focusing in the personal and social uncertainties of a turn-of-the-century UK created a “paralysing sense of apathy [that] is highly

Chekhovian” (Bush, 2013: 187).¹³¹ Finally, David Hare mentioned how “I love young Chekhov – the neglected romantic who wrote 'Platonov', 'Ivanov' and finally 'The Seagull'” (Waldman, 2010): even for someone to whom the “famous techniques of concealment” used by late Chekhov were not appealing or influential, an earlier creative era of his predecessor’s work still proved important for his dramatic art, as proved with his 2015 adaptations of *Platonov*, *Ivanov* and *The Seagull*, originally presented at Chichester Festival Theatre under the name *Young Chekhov*.¹³²

The aesthetic ghost of the Russian writer, many years after its first recognition in the 1920s, seemed in summary to be still going strong on the first decade of the 21st century, influencing many generations of British dramatic creators. The two productions presented below were therefore not the result of an isolated phenomenon initiated by a theatre group, but the result of a well-established interest in an author whose style had inspired many to discuss the socio-politic complexities of the country. The 150th anniversary served as an platform for theatre companies to present shows that capitalised on the event and competed to attract the biggest possible numbers of spectators. Added to the stagings of classic Chekhovian productions, some of which have already been analysed in previous chapters, the works ‘inspired by’ the Russian author acquired a sudden relevance: at a moment when “there is a deluge of the new (...) [where] everyone, from playwrights to artistic directors wants to be of the moment” in an “increasingly crowded market” (Sierz, 2011:

¹³¹ Other female writers to consider could be Pam Gems, who adapted *Uncle Vanya* in 1978, *The Seagull* in 1994 and *The Cherry Orchard* in 2007, and who wrote in 1982 a play called *Aunt Mary (Scenes from a Provincial Life)*, summarised in her official website (run by her son Davis Gems) as “two transvestites run a petrol station and theatre near Birmingham; homage, of a sort, to Chekhov” (Gems, 2013).

¹³² Interestingly, all these writers are white; perhaps revealing how Chekhov was still partly connected to a monolithic notion of national identity, for years there was a notable scarcity of black or mixed-race playwrights who were equally open to recognise Chekhov’s importance in their work. The most obvious exception is the already mentioned Mustapha Matura, who rewrote *Three Sisters* as *Trinidad Sisters* in 1993 and had a writing style filled “with warmth, humanity and humour”, that in its examination of “the detrimental political and economic effects of colonialism on his native Trinidad” and the reflection on “the loss of old traditions to new values” (Goddard, 2013: viii) expressed a unique influence of the Russian writer, based on his political-economic qualities rather than on his melancholic-aesthetic values.

15-16), this association increased the marketability of many productions. At the same time, this adulation underlined Chekhov's value as a brand and part of the cultural tradition carried by both theatrical circles and British audiences; in their attempts to attract patrons through the association with a well-established creator, while at the same time offering something 'unique', some productions demonstrated the importance of the Russian author in the understanding of contemporary issues. The following two shows, in particular, moved towards the satirical and experimental spectrum of the theatrical field, posing questions about the possibilities of meaningful exchange and true intercultural connection at a period of increasing cultural clashes: in their use of Chekhov, both as an individual and as a dramatic creator, they not only treated him as a market strategy but also as a base to reflect on specific socio-cultural elements.

2. Dan Rebellato and *Chekhov in Hell* (4 – 20 November 2010; 18 April – 14 May 2011)

Dan Rebellato is a well-known figure within British cultural circles as a playwright, scholar and lecturer: professor of Contemporary Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London, he has published academic books such as *1956 and All That* (1999) and *Theatre and Globalisation* (2009), and plays such as *Here's What I Did With My Body One Day* (Lightwork, 2005/6), *Static* (Suspect Culture & Graeae, 2008) and *Chekhov in Hell* (Plymouth Drum, 2010). Across these fields there was a common interest in re-exploring theatrical and aesthetic trends, and a desire to investigate the challenges offered to British identity by an increasing sense of cultural diversity and dramatic variety. A brief outline of his academic work reveals it: first, his 1999 text emphasised how the commonly accepted view of the year 1956 as a "breakthrough" when "*Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne's fiery blast against the establishment (...) [radicalised] British theatre overnight" and showed up "the old well-made dramatists (...) as stale and cobwebbed", was "a trite little account

of the impact of the Royal Court” that led to a misunderstanding of the undeniable changes that happened during this particular period (Rebellato, 1999: 1-2). His argument confronted the simplistic division of modern British theatre “into two eras, ‘Before the Court’ and ‘After Devine’”, as well as the “pall of irony [thrown] over the prior generation” of playwrights (Rebellato, 1999: 4), and proposed instead (based on previous research) a historical evolution that changed some aesthetic and political preconceptions. For example, the book indicated how the generation of the Angry Young Men was “prompted and shaped by a desire to revitalize British culture, a culture now shouldering the burden of embodying national supremacy as one of its real bases, its Empire, rapidly declined” (Rebellato, 1999: 192); however, in so doing, it possessed an “anxiety prompted by homosexuality (...), [which] seemed to be everywhere, driving a wedge between meaning and expression, destabilizing the security of our national and cultural identity” (Rebellato, 1999: 192).¹³³ A ‘progressive’ standpoint was then revealed as more imprecise than what had been accepted so far; also, considering the date of the book’s original publication, this re-evaluation exposed not only the construction of a new national identity at a time of colonial revolts and post-war internal transformations, but also the challenges presented by the same theme a year before the start of the 21st century and its millennium fears.

Rebellato’s interest in political complexity within theatrical circles continued unabated in his 2009 text *Theatre and Globalisation*, part of a running series co-edited by Rebellato and Jen Harvie. On it, the author described how “the word ‘globalisation’ is almost as widespread as the phenomenon it describes, [and] has accrued a great variety of meanings, and great disagreements surround what it might signify”, including contradictory views on the notions of “consciousness, culture, conflict,

¹³³ Osborne’s play revealed deeper contradictions: the protagonist “Jimmy is drawn to the Empire, but mocks the *contemporary* version of it”; the title “suggests someone looking back, but their anger being directed at the failure of the present to live up to the past”; and the general dramatic perspective “seems to correspond to the right’s view of decolonisation rather than the left’s” (Rebellato, 1999: 141).

politics and money” (Rebellato, 2009: 4). Agreeing with those who pointed out the risks and losses of a worldwide cultural “uniformity”, he argued “that globalisation, as an economic phenomenon, was opposed by the counter-tradition of cosmopolitanism”, defined by an aim for meaningful exchanges and mutual social learning (Rebellato, 2009: 11); and theatre, as a possessor “of important formal complexities that make it particularly suitable for developing and sustaining the ethical imagination”, was (or should become) a beacon of these communal communicative values (Rebellato, 2009: 74-75). In a few words, Rebellato continued to defend, ten years after his first publication, the possibilities offered by the theatrical experience to create intercultural links: a declaration written at a historical time of financial crisis, growing public fears regarding immigration and a discussion of the problems of the European Union project.

Chekhov in Hell, a drama premiered only a year after the publication of *Theatre and Globalisation*, followed a similar trend: it attempted to create through aesthetic devices an intercultural play, where the challenges endured by specific characters became examples to express in a humoristic and satiric way the necessity of dialoguing to construct a new British identity. Opened “at the Drum Theatre, Plymouth in November 2010” (Rebellato, 2013a), the show started its run not in a London venue, but in a well-regarded regional theatre: a place “built in 1982 and designed and constructed by Sound Research Labs Ltd and the Peter Moro Partnership”, and possessor of “two auditoriums, the main Theatre which houses 1296 people and the smaller Drum Theatre which seats 192” (Lloyd, 2015), which was described by the Arts Council as “the largest and best attended regional producing theatre in the United Kingdom and the leading promoter of theatre in the southwest” (Arts Council England, 2014). The Drum itself, as the website of the company described, “built a national reputation for the quality of its programme and innovative work, winning the prestigious Peter Brook Empty Space Award”, and collaborated “with leading theatres and companies in the United Kingdom and Europe including Paines Plough, Told by an Idiot, Ontroerend Goed, Frantic Assembly

and The Royal Court” (Royal Plymouth, 2015). Going beyond the self-promoting qualities of these statements, a consideration of the shows presented during the same autumn/spring season when Rebellato’s play was presented indicated an interesting (if not ground-breaking¹³⁴) selection that balanced London blockbusters, commissions for foreign directors and cutting edge local creations: the West End production of “*The Sound of Music* (...), starring Michael Praed, Kirsty Malpass and Marilyn Hill”; a revision and re-staging of “Matthew Bourne’s *Cinderella*” at the main hall; the experimental play *Teenage Riot*, created by the abovementioned Belgian company Ontroerend Goed; and Mike Bartlett’s play *Love, Love, Love*, an epic spanning four decades that compared the baby-boomer and the late 80s – early 90s generations, at the Drum (This is Devon, 2010). In the more specific case of Rebellato’s play, its relevance can be seen as well in the facts that it was “the Theatre Royal’s own production”, and that it was directed “by Simon Stokes, the theatre’s artistic director” (This is Devon, 2010). Both elements indicated that there existed a close rapport between writer, director and company, which added to the cultural and social varied contents of the play itself, and suggested that Chekhov’s adventures in the 21st century could be read as a satiric comment on London made from previously underestimated, and culturally emerging, peripheral regions. After all, Plymouth had been considered for generations more a naval and industrial centre than a cultural one; it was easy to consider it, as John Harris put it, as a city “tucked away in the far-left corner of England, (...) somewhere too often left to fend for itself” (Harris, 2015). However, the decline of the naval dockyards, started in the 1980s and caused by failed privatisation processes and a national decrease of shipbuilding industries, led the city to reinvent itself as ‘Britain’s Ocean city’, with culture playing a central role; under this context, *Chekhov in Hell* served first as a small yet

¹³⁴ Even though the Theatre Royal (and Drum Theatre) was a microscopic version of the range of metropolitan theatre (and in that sense it will be analysed), its selection of productions was similar (if more ambitious) to other regional theatres in Glasgow, Newcastle, Birmingham and Manchester (for example).

representative spearhead of this economic restructuration, and second as an example of those 'marginal' discourses that wanted to be taken into consideration within the country's dramatic arena and in the construction of new national identities.¹³⁵ Also, since Plymouth "seem[ed] to be in flux, from a once-grand centre purpose-built after the war, to parts of the city in which people have left their old homes to make way for regeneration, and suddenly had to find their feet in new neighbourhoods", the play's voices indirectly reinforced the fact that the location where it was first premiered mirrored "the future of the country as a whole" (Harris, 2015): one where the memory of a 'golden past', the recognition of a present transformation and the uncertainty for the future coexisted in contradictory struggles.

Reinforcing this reading, the show also proposed a reformist approach to the tradition of state-of-the-nation plays, described by Nadine Holdsworth (2010: 39) as the "works that have the nation, preferably in some sort of rupture, crisis or conflict, at their core", deploying "representations of personal events, family structures and social or political organisations as a microcosm of the nation-state to comment directly or indirectly on the ills befalling society, on key narratives of nationhood or on the state of the nation as it wrestles with changing circumstances". From this perspective, the 'Hell' of the title could be read as a critical reflection on the state of British society at the time of the play's writing; and Chekhov as the silent observer that in his understanding obliquely recommended a more encompassing understanding among cultures.

¹³⁵ It could be counterargued that Rebellato was a London born and based author, who lived at the centre of cultural power and therefore could not possibly represent the contradictions and/or needs of Plymouth's dramatic culture (invalidating the 'peripheral' nature of his play). To this, it must be said that almost all of his previous theatrical productions were presented either in other regional venues (like 2008's *Static*, shown at the Tron in Glasgow) or in fringe stages in London (such as 2004's *Here's what I did with my body one day*, premiered at the Pleasance Theatre), which positioned him as a less centric author. Also, Drum Theatre's decision to stage his play was in itself a political-dramatic decision, which indicated its interest to get good writers while propelling its own artistic and dramatic capabilities. Finally, Rebellato's close collaboration with the Drum ensured his play's connection with the interests of the venue, while escaping from the thematic constraints and economic implications of the West End's theatrical productions.

The reception of the first presentation of the show in Plymouth was positive: Lyn Gardner from *The Guardian* gave it 4 out of 5 stars and described it as a 21st century twist on Chekhov's motifs, "funny, but sad, too, presenting an endless spectacle of people wanting to do good but endlessly doing harm", while praising "Simon Stokes's excellent production [which] keeps the whole thing bubbling along" (Gardner, 2010). Meanwhile, Daisy Bowie-Sell, from *The Daily Telegraph*, gave it 3 out of 5 stars, writing that "it makes total sense that Rebellato has chosen Chekhov to make us reflect on what we have become – he was a sharp observer of his own society", but also indicating that "each scene feels distinctly disconnected (...), [and] all too often other performances [besides "Simon Gregor's beautiful portrayal of Chekhov"] descend into clichéd performances of stock characters" (Bowie-Sell, 2010). Beyond their subjective appraisals and criticisms, these reviews shared a common trend: a presupposed view of Chekhov the writer as a possessor of wisdom, observational equanimity and a skill to mix humour with tragic pathos. The choice of making *him* the protagonist of the work, awaking "from a 100-year sleep to find himself in a 21st century NHS hospital" (Gardner, 2010), became then highly symbolic: by positioning him even above his most accomplished literary characters, Rebellato underlined not only the universality of his photographed persona –all pince-nez, dapper suits and elegantly trimmed beard–, but most importantly his level of recognition within the UK itself. 150 years after his birth, he had become –as John E. Wermers wrote regarding Shakespeare– an emblem of "cultural authority (...), [a possessor of a] huge academic and commercial capital (...) and a tool for mapping and challenging cultural norms" (Wermers, 2012: 31): by "inspiring confidences and confessions from the people he meets (...), the great observer of 19th-century Russian life reflected back through his eyes the ridiculousness of 21st century [London] life" (Gardner, 2010), ultimately becoming a witness of the challenges faced by the local society in his attempts at cultural communication. What conservative British critics, spectators and directors

attempted for years –to transmute the Russian playwright into a ‘British’ figure–, finally seemed to become a physical reality.

Different elements, however, pointed out how this apparent consummation of traditions hid a different perspective: Chekhov’s situation as a foreigner who tried to grasp a world that was beyond his previous personal experiences actually re-invigorated his position as an outsider, an almost clinical observer whose perspectives allowed different readings of the country’s situation. To prove this, it must be considered first how the show, once it ended its run in Plymouth, was transferred for a month-long season to a London theatre characterised not by its belonging to a West End conglomerate but by a certain degree of experimentation: the Soho Theatre Company, “a diminutive playhouse which tried to sustain a consistent policy if not a permanent company”, formed in 1969 by Verity Bargate and Fred Proud at a time when “sex was being happily compounded with drugs and rock’n’roll” and there was a surge of fringe companies in “an explosion of often inchoate creativity” (Trussler, 2000: 340). Unsurprisingly, the company capitalised on these origins: describing itself as “nested a few doors down from Karl Marx’s 1850s crash pad, just up from the infamous Colony Room (...) at the very address that Mozart played in 1764” (Soho Theatre, 2014), the venue was presented as a quirky mixture of artistic edginess and leftist inclinations. The reality was more pedestrian, with the time of Rebellato’s play presentation being one of physical refurbishments and personnel changes: after the departure of previous artistic director Lisa Goldman in June 2010, her successor Steve Marmion was dealing with a warning from Arts Council England “that its coffers were empty and Soho needed to prepare itself for cuts”, which eventually amounted to a 17.6% reduction of the previous year budget and led to a “redevelopment project” that turned “the downstairs of the venue (...) into a new 150-seat cabaret space” and transformed the “100-seat studio, which used to function as a straight rental space to generate income”, into “the Soho Theatre Upstairs (...), a proper curated venue with many of the shows working on a box

office split, rather than a straight rental deal” (Smith, 2011). Added to this, the new management re-staged shows such as “the London debut of *Realism* [by Anthony Neilson], which premiered at the 2006 Edinburgh International Festival (...) [and] pulled back the curtain in front of the imagination and fantasies of a normal man”, and commissioned from the “up-and-coming writer Ed Harris” the play *Mongrel Island*, which took “a bittersweet, touching and darkly comic look at how the world and workplace invade and manipulate our humanity” (What’s On Stage, 2011): considered together with *Chekhov in Hell*, the shows revealed an interest in unusual regional creations, as well as an appreciation of the exploration of everyday quandaries. The fact that all of them were presented in the main venue and not in the smaller secondary stage also indicated the relevance given to them, perhaps following Marmion’s interest “to work on the programming mix” and the “weaving together more” of the “comedy work that we do” with the world of tragedy and opera (Smith, 2011). As he said, “if you look at the masks that sum up theatre, [comedy and tragedy] are the same size” (Smith, 2011).¹³⁶

After a trip to the regions, Rebellato’s Chekhov and the rest of the characters in his play (with their contradictory opinions about contemporary London), finally seemed to reach ‘home’: the question now was how it was going to be the critical reception there. The answer was more mixed this time around: Natasha Tripney from *The Stage* (2011) referred to it as an “entertaining new play (...) at its best (...) both biting and bittersweet” that nevertheless was “unsatisfying in the way [it] deals only in extremes”; Michael Coveney from *The Independent* (2011b) pointed out that “the play does not amount to much because there’s no attempt to show how Chekhov would adjust to new circumstances”, and that “the impact of the harsh reality never registers in the play, which presents

¹³⁶ It cannot be underestimated here the economic interests that led to this transfer. The presentation of a production coming from an (admittedly important) regional theatre, where it had received a positive reception from critics and audiences alike, was a cost-effective way to diminish the financial risks of staging a new production and at least partly ensure a profitable run, all while still satisfying Soho Theatre’s audiences interest for edgy contemporary shows.

only this sadly disappointed ghost [Chekhov] in a series of bitty, satirical scenes from modern life”; finally, Dominic Cavendish from *The Telegraph* (2011) indicated how “the premise –that Anton Chekhov wakes from a coma, body miraculously still functioning– is plainly on the furthest side of far-fetched”, and that it was problematic the way “Rebellato splashes around in the shallows of our culture (...) without acknowledging the advances, in medicine and welfare say, that would impress a revenant Chekhov”. Undeniably, these views signalled the structural problems and sketchiness present in Rebellato’s play, that lessened its fluidity and dramatic impact; also, they demonstrated the author’s appropriation of Chekhov as a character, which reinforced his literary and political-symbolic traits in order to emphasise his humanistic qualities as an observer of human foibles, while at the same time underestimating other equally valuable sides of his historical personality such as his ambivalent relations with women or his medical and philanthropic engagements.

At the same time, these reviews revealed a lot about the political and aesthetic perspectives of the reviewers. For example, Coveney (2011b) based his criticism on the association with Chekhov’s plays and what he read as their constant “unfulfilled yearning, a sense of waste, and the idea that present-day suffering ensures a better future for those who come after”: this implied, once more, the idea of the Russian writer not only as a creator of tragic and nostalgic works, but also as cultural symbol whose presence as a character in someone else’s play demanded a specific artistic perspective that, as seen throughout this work, repressed the possibility of a socio-economic critique of the UK and required instead a sweetened and less confrontational view. The same idea underscored some of Cavendish’s criticisms (2011): despite accurately indicating the limitations of Rebellato’s take on the character, his idea that the playwright should have written a story that dealt “more explicitly about what Chekhov would make of his homeland today” was limited in the sense that it implied a dismissal of Rebellato’s critiques of British inequalities, suggesting (somehow absurdly) that he had to leave his country and live in Russia for years before making an in-depth satire about it.

Again, this does not deny the validity of some of these criticisms; but beyond the intrinsic aesthetic qualities or fallibilities of the play itself, what matters is that Rebellato's engagement with a different side of Chekhov's persona –that of the writer of *The Bear* and *The Proposal*, of the intellectual who wondered with subtle sardonicism if "life, of which we know nothing (...) is worth all the agonizing reflections which wear out our Russian wits" (Chekhov, 1920)– was received by some London critics with a mixture of indifference and disinterest. Not all of them, of course: it is revealing that the most positive review of the show during its London run was given by Jake Orr in *A Younger Theatre*, "a publication, production company and resource for emerging creatives" that describes itself as "a platform for those who are often unheard" (A Younger Theatre, 2014). While recognising that "there are certain moments that seem to be drawn out, and feel misplaced", Orr admired how "Rebellato uses Chekhov as a character to expose the lunacy of the way society has evolved and lost the idea of history and meaning to life", using comedy and "bizarre character situations" to hold up "a mirror to his audience and let us see the absurdity of the modern world we have created" (Orr, 2011). The reviewer, while perhaps falling into an exaggerated praise of these qualities, still managed to underscore the political messages that Rebellato tried to convey through his fantastic concoction: a desire to reposition Chekhov's established convention as an enlightening observer of human foibles by turning it from a harmless construction to one that could be used to explore the complexities of contemporary Britain, with all its cultural challenges and necessities of meaningful exchange.

Also, Orr underlined the tone used by the playwright, one that juxtaposed "tender moments that captured a sense of the world that Chekhov once saw (...) against rambling monologues worthy of day-time soap dramas" (Orr, 2011): a combination that Michael Coveney –in a second and more stringent review for *What's On Stage* (2011)– criticised as a series of "stand alone" passages "unrelated to any dramatic texture of dynamism". Without denying this critique, this could be reinterpreted as an attempt to sacrifice conventional notions of drama in favour of postmodern

techniques such as “the play of styles, pastiche, the celebration of artifice (...); the open display of structural devices, or their dismantling and reassembly; the abandonment of artistic unity [and] the cross-over with popular modes” (Drain, 2002: 8).¹³⁷ Indeed, *Chekhov in Hell* used contemporary theatrical elements such as the meta-theatrical appropriation of Chekhov as a character and the use of genre conventions –present for instance in a subplot that connected Chekhov to a “Russian gangster with links to international people trafficking” (Rebellato, 2010: 54)– to create a self-consciously pulpy and melodramatic plot that allowed social commentary and emotional introspection. The result was a snappy, dislocated play that –as its title implied– used London as a representation of 21st century Britain: a hellish world filled with fashionistas, social workers, prostitutes and lap dancing clubs, where the revived Russian writer wandered in a mostly quiet and frustrating attempt at understanding the transformations suffered by the world during the century he had been in coma.¹³⁸ A cavalcade of characters and voices, played by the same actors over and over again, came and went in a series of short dramatic sketches that explored among other things contemporary society’s increasing reliance on technology and the Internet (scenes 3 and 19), the sexist attitudes still prevalent in the world of fashion (scene 14), the difficulties experienced by popular neighbourhoods and councils at a time of economic recession (scene 10), and generally the

¹³⁷ Drain indicated in *Twentieth Century Theatre: A Sourcebook* that the boundary separating the notions of modernism and post-modernist, “never that clear, in theatre seems more one of chronology than principle. This is not because theatre lags behind, but rather the reverse. Many of the features commonly identified as postmodernist in the other arts are in one sense or another ‘theatrical’; and they already have a long history in modernist theatre” (Drain, 2002: 8). All this means that the ‘postmodern’ notions explained in the next paragraphs will be necessarily understood under this reading where ‘modernist’ and ‘postmodernist’ techniques sometimes overlap and complement each other.

¹³⁸ An intertheatrical connection can be established here with Vladimir Mayakovsky’s 1929 play *The Bedbug*, where Party Member Prisykin accidentally freezes in 1929 and then is scientifically revived in 1979, when he comically confronts the transformations of the Soviet project. Although Rebellato never directly referred this drama, it could be argued that the fantastic conceit at the centre of his play was yet another example of intercultural recreation. It must be pointed out, though, that while the Soviet’s author started with the present and then created an imagined future, Rebellato’s play used a character from the past to describe a then contemporary social situation.

Babelian quality of a urban society where Ukrainians, Russians and British –among other cultures– looked for communal, mutual understanding.

This fragmentary quality, though, did not prevent the play from following a linear narrative. Taking structural cues from a more ‘traditional’ type of theatre, Rebellato created three main plots that suggested a progression: one –already mentioned–, the relationship between Chekhov and the gangster Aleksandr; two, Aleksandr’s search for Irina, a prostitute he used to exploit in the past; and three, Nicola’s attempt to find Chekhov (described as a “distant uncle” of his [Rebellato, 2010: 30]) with the help of Claire, a “police community support officer” (Rebellato, 2010: 46). The three storylines were interspersed in between the mentioned scenes of Chekhov discovering different – and for him sometimes incomprehensible– urban cultures and traditions; at the very end, they were all connected through a police raid in a brothel, where Aleksandr was shot and Chekhov finally received –in the most tragic passage of the whole play– an illustration of all the horrors of the 20th century through Irina’s wary monologues. The final impression was one of calculated chaos: behind a ‘disinterest’ for a defined dramatic structure, Rebellato mixed realist and postmodern dramatic styles to explore British society, satirically presenting the political contradictions faced by the nation at a time of intercultural encounters. As James Fisher (2008: 69) wrote regarding the work of American playwright Tony Kushner, his “plays are certainly finished works, traditionally literary in ways that much postmodern theatre is not. But the illusion of open-endedness remains critical to him. To a point, he even permits the changing and updating of his plays, suggesting that the ongoing consideration of a play’s issues matter to him”. Similar words could be applied to Rebellato’s aesthetics in *Chekhov in Hell*, which explicitly emphasised creative freedom by allowing great flexibility in the staging and the interpretations of characters and situations. As the author indicated on ‘A note on production’, printed right before the play text, “there should be an *arbitrary* relationship between actor and character. Women can play men and vice versa, old playing young,

etc. But not systematically. At points identity should be undecidable” (Rebellato, 2010: 23). This openly questioned the meaning of ‘identity’ itself: in a society in constant flux, where new immigrants mixed with young citizens whose parents came from different corners of the world and with people whose families had been living for generations in the same neighbourhood, how was it be possible to sustain a static vision of personal and cultural identity? Rebellato, in his dramatic choices, answered this question with a simple poetic decision: not to counteract this flow with a specific view of what being British meant, but rather to allow its protean quality to show in the changing faces of his actors and sets.

The portrayal of satirical characters, added to Rebellato’s desire (2010: 23) for “an audience to experience the [24] scene titles” whether in spoken, written or printed form, also offered a meta-theatrical layer where “theatre is both a play and play (...), actor and character are simultaneously visible and the play’s artifice is as fully evident as it is in Brecht’s epic theatre” (Fisher, 2008: 269). As in many of the German playwright’s dramas, the political undertone to the whole endeavour was evident: rather than to openly choose an ideological viewpoint to interpret the conflicts presented in the story, Rebellato used distancing effects to generate in the spectators intellectual questionings about their own understandings of the cultural and ethical transformations of British society. For example, the friendship between Aleksandr and Chekhov, both ‘outsiders’ and members of a multifaceted urban culture, represented not only opposite considerations of an equally problematic ‘Russian’ identity –one humanist, literary and slightly melancholy, the other pragmatic, self-centred and fierce–, but also different approaches to the notions of cultural integration and communication: the older writer being an attentive listener and perpetual apprentice, the younger character acting with an ironic desire to behave like “an English gentleman”, all business meetings, jokes and football (Rebellato, 2010: 49). The fantastic quality of the story allowed the mixture of almost neo-realistic portraits of chefs and teenagers with surreal events like the encounter of Chekhov and his long-

dead wife Olga Knipper as a presence hovering in the Northern Lights: like in Kushner's dramas, the stage became the "sole realm in which it is possible (...) to imagine impossible possibilities, to conjure visions of the past and the future, to embrace the necessity and inevitability of change (...) and to experiment with new, more diverse conceptions of community" (Fisher, J., 2008: 268).

In light of the above, the consideration of Rebellato's show as a state-of-the-nation play was reinforced: in its succession of short and sketchy scenes, its employment of overlapping dialogues and its use of languages other than English during important sections of the play (leaving for example in untranslated Russian Irina's aforementioned climactic monologue), it "held together the public and the private in its grand visions of Britain and Britishness", and "reflected the structure of the nation-state" (Rebellato, 2013: 248) by functioning as a collage that presented the chaotic elements, protean qualities and contradictory nature of contemporary British identity.¹³⁹ Also, rather than trying to find a specific answer to these questions by proposing a cohesive vision of national identity, Rebellato shared "a postmodern ambivalence regarding religious dogma, contemporary politics and notions of traditional (and heatedly debated) moral values" (Fisher, J., 2008: 267), preferring instead a humorous tone (read by some critics as superficial) that used satire as its strongest aesthetic weapon. Indeed, the comic depictions of social spaces such as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class in scene 5, or sardonic conversations such as the discussion in scene 12 about "a deconstructed bacon and eggs breakfast" (Rebellato, 2010: 63), created an unruly atmosphere of "inquiry and provocation, play and display" that, following Dustin Griffith's (1994: 4-5) description in *Satire: a Critical Reintroduction*, was "problematic, open-ended, essayistic, ambiguous in its relationship to history, uncertain in its political effect, resistant to formal closure,

¹³⁹ Rebellato, in his book chapter *From the State of the Nation to Globalisation* (2013: 246), argued how "the political context in which the state-of-the-nation play was developed has changed, and as a consequence political theatre has changed": this partly explains the unconventional structure chosen for this drama.

more inclined to ask questions than to provide answers, and ambivalent about the pleasures it offers”.

The result of this satiric complexity added an extra degree of ambiguity that stressed Rebellato’s targets –consumerism, religion, dance music, culinary– while avoiding an overtly pejorative, simplistic or moralistic attack to any of them. Instead, through the idealised figure of Chekhov –a much older and pensive man than the actual playwright– the whole work acquired a humanistic value; even in the funniest moments there was a ruminative undercurrent of understanding, not necessarily giving psychological depth to every character –which was not even intended– but offering a nuanced view of mankind’s fragility and moral greyness. Beyond its ostensible aesthetic separation from Chekhov’s plays, using postmodern techniques of fragmentation and meta-theatricality, Rebellato revealed himself as a follower of Chekhovian traditions, using similar approaches to the ones used by the Russian writer in his early satiric sketches like *The Bear* and *The Proposal* while simultaneously embracing the humanistic readings of his late plays, in order to continue social and cultural explorations. The ‘traditional’ British Chekhov, embodied in the nostalgic renderings of his dramas, was turned then on its head, using Anton Chekhov as a character that explored the contradictions of a chaotic and multicultural London; past and present were intermingled, and someone who had come to embody for some conservative quarters a symbol of monolithic cultural identity was turned into an explorer of the challenges of intercultural exchange and the construction of social symbolisms.

The concern for the coexistence of local and foreign discourses was, in fact, one of Rebellato’s main interests in his academic work. *Chekhov in Hell* could be seen as an exploration of these complexities through a dramatic angle: taking into consideration the presence of so many social classes and cultures into one geographical space (London), where Anton Chekhov the character was the last

guest to a chaotic party filled with contradictions, how was it possible to structure and preserve a functional society? Further globalisation was not in his opinion the solution: as he developed in *Theatre and Globalisation*, the term hid “the rise of global capitalism operating under neoliberal policy conditions” (Rebellato, 2009: 12), that is, the establishment of an economic system that increased interconnectivity inside and between communities but also led to “externality, amorality, and inequality” (Rebellato, 2009: 35). The world that the main character of his play repeatedly tried to understand was then an unequal one, where a Web designer could create an app to tag, value and buy every object (Rebellato, 2010: 84), and a clergyman could turn the idea of God into a purchasable commodity described as “the biggest bestest bunch of flowers you ever saw. Wrapped in the cellophane of revelation with a little sachet taped to the side that says ‘eternal life’” (Rebellato, 2010: 80). According to the British author, to return to a less selfish understanding of culture it was therefore necessary to embrace an entirely different approach: one that respected all cultures rather than trivialized them into sources of profit.

This is where the notion of *cosmopolitanism* entered the stage: a term that symbolised the aesthetic interests pursued by Rebellato, and that can be seen as his theoretical attempt to offer a solution to the social challenges present in reality and in his 2010 play. “A belief that all human beings, regardless of their differences, are members of a single community and all worthy of equal moral regard” (Rebellato, 2009: 60): in this definition lies a central recognition of the humanity of all people, and the consideration of their identical value as a way to establish fruitful channels of communication. The structure of the play, with its main character who remained the same while the world mutated around him¹⁴⁰, was revealed in a new light; the apparently passive act of listening

¹⁴⁰ In ‘A note on Production’, Rebellato indicated that the mutable connections between actor and character did not apply “to the first scene and not to Chekhov” (Rebellato, 2010: 23). At first sight, this could be considered as a structural attempt to create a stable core in the play that preserved static identities among

to others, as Anton Chekhov the character did during the whole story, became a dramatic celebration of the Kantian categorical imperative, founded on “*absolute equality of consideration of every person in the world*” (Rebellato, 2009: 71), that is, on the importance of understanding (as far as possible) the other. Also, the already mentioned meta-theatricality of the story emphasised the ethics of acting, which “involves a level of imaginative engagement with another (fictional) person, a determination to occupy and understand that person’s actions, whether that is psychologically or socially” (Rebellato, 2009: 71). The separation between character and performer allowed a critical understanding of the messages of each scene and amplified the universal values of the plot above psychological attachments. More importantly, it produced a stronger participation of the audience, constantly presenting ethical dilemmas and asking spectators for individual and constructive perspectives on how to solve them. The result was the reinforcement of an ethical principle, “founded in both the autonomy of the individual will *and* the universal community of beings” (Rebellato, 2009: 72), where viewers were asked to reach their own conclusions about the essence of the collective, and use them not only for the understanding of the play but also for the improvement of the intercultural society where they were located.

The fact that Rebellato’s dramatic work ended with Chekhov the character repeating *shto eto znachit?* (‘what does it mean?’) just after the monologue of the prostitute and the murder of Aleksandr by the police acquired then a more ambivalent meaning: an expression of grief and despair also became a subtle question and challenge to those audience members who could understand it.¹⁴¹ What did it mean to be British at the turn of the first decade of the 21st century,

flexible perspectives; but considering Chekhov’s silence, as well as his desire to listen to others, it could be argued that these decisions demonstrated instead the core of Rebellato’s explorations, that is, the differentiation between a more static past and a present of constant transformations, where the self did not disappear but was rather understood more than ever from its connection and relation with the ‘Other’.

¹⁴¹ It is worth considering again the value of these untranslated dialogues: they indicated Rebellato’s recognition of the multicultural and multilingual qualities of his audience, for whom English was just one

how could someone belong to this social group?: these questions were posed without offering any answers, left as open enquiries ready to be interpreted. At a time of communicative fluxes, dramatic art acquired a protean quality; “conventional naturalistic playwriting [was] no longer adequate to the new realities of a globalizing world, [demanding alongside] cosmopolitanism new theatrical and performance forms” (Rebellato, 2009: 72). *Chekhov in Hell* proposed then a controlled fragmentation that reflected these contradictions while concurrently allowing a rewarding interculturalism in the superimposition of voices it created: not the “contested and controversial history of Western theatre’s attempts to co-opt (usually) Asian theatre forms to reinvigorate its own culture” (Rebellato, 2009: 3), but a mixture of old and new traditions, where characters of diverse backgrounds presented their beliefs and satire served as a distorted mirror that emphasised each alienating element of contemporary society while defending –through Chekhov’s central position– the necessity of critical thought and a search for the plural truths of human nature. So, even though the main character did not get any answers, what mattered was his heartfelt attempt at understanding what surrounded him: this difficult but important task was what Chekhov symbolised, and his most important message to a 21st century’s audience.

3. dreamthinkspeak’s *Before I sleep* (4 May – June 2010)

As seen above, *Chekhov in Hell* reinterpreted in a creative fashion the socio-political and intercultural qualities of Chekhovian discourse; its aesthetic-dramatic potentialities, however, were still framed by a linear plot and a presentation on a traditional theatre stage. By contrast, dreamthinkspeak’s *Before I sleep* went beyond these limitations and proposed a reading that

language that coexisted with an increasingly larger number of other idioms. It was, in a few words, an acceptance of the UK’s cultural variety.

confronted the written boundaries of drama and transformed the staging space into a character filled with physical and symbolical possibilities. The following pages, then, will analyse how this show took even further Chekhov's revitalisation by mixing technical and thematic innovations, presenting a very plural and fluid understanding of British national identity.

The production opened as part of the same 2010 Brighton Festival that was already analysed when discussing Daniel Veronese's *Spying on a Woman Killing Herself*. Then, it was indicated how an organisation that presented itself as 'alternative' was also part of a supply and demand system "whose aim is not just to obtain the greatest value from the production of cultural goods and services but also to increase their consumption and the access that consumers have to them" (Towse, 2010: 534).¹⁴² Beyond the directors' interests, or the original aesthetic intentions of their work, an extra economic factor was considered, where "creative industries are promoted and producers of cultural products (...) are able to increase their markets and probably obtain extra public finance for putting on special events (Towse, 2010: 513): foreign shows such as Veronese's acquired fresh interpretations when 'transplanted' to new geographical spaces, allowing reviewers and theatre scholars alike a deeper understanding not only of the socio-political interests of those who had selected them but also of the audiences themselves.

Added to this, it must be considered now the value that theatre festivals offer to the cities where they take place: as Ruth Towse developed, they are "frequently promoted by a city or other place in order to promote an image and to encourage tourism, and in order to do so [they are] subsidized from taxes" (Towse, 2010: 529). This is exactly Brighton Festival's case, an event that, as its own website recognised, is "produced and delivered by the same team that runs the city's leading arts venue, the grade I listed Brighton Dome" (Brighton Festival, 2015): a venue that in turn is supported

¹⁴² This also influenced *Chekhov in Hell*: as mentioned before, both its original presentation in Plymouth and its transfer to London responded not only to aesthetic but also to political and financial reasons.

by “Brighton & Hove City Council and Arts Council England” (Brighton Dome, 2015). This interconnectivity suggests a centralised economic control over both endeavours, and implies (for better or worse) an aesthetic continuity with local projects and interests. When it comes to foreign and previously premiered shows, as seen in Veronese’s case, their selection combines then a continuation of artistic trends already explored by the organisers in previous projects, and a desire to enrich local discourses with the transformative qualities of the ‘otherness’ they possess.¹⁴³ Meanwhile, in the case of commissioned productions like *Before I sleep* (the fourth collaboration between the Festival and dreamthinkspeak), their presence offers more interpretative possibilities: besides their position as economic artefacts that boost the ‘exclusivity’ of the Festival, these shows propose interesting dilemmas regarding their aesthetic connection to the festival’s location, and their value to establish meaningful (or problematic) cultural dialogues with the communities to which they are specifically intended.

As it will be seen below, *Before I sleep* was the result of a long term working relationship between the Brighton Festival organisers and the theatre company. dreamthinkspeak was created in 1999, after director Tristan Sharps, following a 1995 piece “inspired by Dostoyevsky’s *The Gambler* at The Hawth in Crawley” where the studio-theatre was “recreated as a casino where the audience could gamble away with chips they had picked up as part of their journey around the space”, combined his interests in arts, architecture and drama to begin a company where “connecting live performance to space” would be the main priority (McLaren, 2012). Its first production was *Who goes There*, a “deconstructed version of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*” where the audience promenaded “through corridors, galleries, basements and performance areas, witnessing and eavesdropping on

¹⁴³ Bruno Fey made the point that “festivals can be more adventurous in their programming than a regular a theatre or concert hall is able to” (Towse, 2010: 518): without the pressures of a massive economic downturn due to an overpriced production process or a failed run during the regular season, the creators of the Festival had the chance to offer to their local audiences the kind of events that otherwise would have been difficult to present.

the action around them” (Gardner, 2002). “Co-commissioned by the Brighton [Festival] 2001, The Gardner Arts Centre, The Hawth and The Hazlitt and Corn Exchange”, it received a positive critical reception, with *The Guardian*’s Lyn Gardner (2002) describing it as a “highly original take on the well-worn play (...) [that] gets to the rot at the heart of Denmark and inside the minds of all the main characters”, and Rhoda Koenig from *The Independent* (2002) commenting that “*Hamlet* has been sweetly deconstructed (...) in a way that keeps us on the go, not only physically but mentally”. Following this, the company created other equally successful shows like *Do not Look Back* (2003-2008), *Underground* (2005) and *Other Step Forward, One Step Back* (2008); despite the fact that some of them were recreated in other spaces around the world¹⁴⁴, all of them –with the exception of *One Step Forward*– were at least co-commissioned by the Brighton Festival and premiered in different spaces around the city. From a more pragmatic perspective, this could be read as a successful economic partnership that benefited both sides, giving solid sponsorship and a good advertising platform to the theatre company, and diminishing for the arts organisation the risks of economic failure with a viable commodity while preserving its commitment to the creation of new artistic works.¹⁴⁵ If taken to the extreme, this could lead to an understanding of the whole endeavour as an economic project that prioritised profitability over cultural exchange, and to see *Before I sleep* as a dramatic artefact that, in the best of cases, preferred to show off a unique aesthetic style rather than to establish intercultural dialogues with regional discourses.

¹⁴⁴ *Do not Look Now*, “a journey into the past and a visual meditation on loss”, was “recreated for twelve sites in the UK and beyond, including (...) the labyrinth former Treasury building in Perth Australia, a vast disused print factory in Moscow and the abandoned Majestic Hotel in Kuala Lumpur” (dreamthinkspeak, 2015).

¹⁴⁵ There are important economic reasons for a festival to publicly support the creation of new artistic works. As Towse indicates, “grant-making bodies might also be interested in the number of new productions or commissioned works” (Towse, 2010: 215): this means that in order to better position itself at a national level (for instance, with Arts Council England), it was convenient for the Brighton Festival to promote new works that at the same time promised a certain degree of economic success.

A more detailed analysis, however, reveals this reading as highly reductive: despite the validity of its arguments (no matter its progressive artistic achievements, the play remained part of a traditional commercial market), dreamthinkspeak established different bonds with the Festival and the community of Brighton. Perhaps the most obvious one is the fact that artistic director Tristan Sharps, a resident of the city, has based his company there since its inception; beyond this, though, it should be mentioned that *Before I sleep* aimed for a stronger connection with local communities, emphasising a “sense of locality” by getting the “vast majority of the materials and service organisations employed in the production” from “within a 1km radius of the building” (dreamthinkspeak, 2010: 3). Naturally, this could be seen as another economic decision, an attempt to cut expenses while providing money to underappreciated enterprises: as the programme indicated, “the London Road area is seen as an economically deprived district, but contains a network of independent creative, artisanal and retail organisations of genuine quality that are waiting to be exploited and developed as businesses rather than swept away and exploited by developers as part of the imminent regeneration scheme” (dreamthinkspeak, 2010: 3). The critical tone of this statement, however, revealed an extra layer that influenced the whole production: what reviewer Bella Todd (2010) described as the discovery of a “political purpose” by the company. Indeed, beyond its results and ambiguities, it is clear that dreamthinkspeak responded in 2010 to its surroundings in a way that it hadn’t done before, structuring the show not only around stylistic preferences or well-known playwrights (elements still present in *Before I Sleep*), but also around the socio-political situation of the city where it premiered.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ This political commitment would be developed even further in a later production, *One Day, Maybe*, premiered in Gwangju, South Korea, “in a large disused school in September 2013”, and inspired “by the Gwanju Uprising” of May 1980, when “hundreds of people (...) demonstrated in the name of Democracy [and] were brutally murdered by the paratroopers in the name of the government” (dreamthinkspeak, 2015). The production’s main aim, to establish a link between the past and present of a specific society, was also close to the goals of *Before I Sleep*.

To understand this, it is necessary to consider the history of the place where the show was presented: the Co-operative Society Store. Originally a small depot founded in 1906 that “took over the adjoining premises” and was united “into a single shop in about 1919”, it became “the largest building in London Road” after the construction of a structure “designed by Bethell and Swanwell [that] opened on 12 September 1931 with four storeys and a 180-foot frontage relieved by two giant, fluted Doric columns above the entrance”; after that, and for nearly a century, it remained as “the largest department store in Brighton” (Carder, 2007). By the time of *Before I sleep*’s premiere, the place had come to symbolize for the people of Brighton an experiment in social collaboration developed in the UK since the 19th century: one that started when, during the early industrial revolution, “despite the huge increase in production, working-class living standards actually fell, (...) rapid urbanization made the town dangerous pools of infection, (...) [and] a gulf opened between those who had capital and those who only had their labour to sell” (Birchall, 1997: 2-3). As a response to these inequalities, “a broadly based movement of co-operative societies began in 1826 in Brighton and by 1833 spread all over Britain and even to Ireland”; following the ideas of industrialist Robert Owen and doctor William King (incidentally a member of Brighton’s society), they created “a plan for villages of co-operation, in which the working classes could live and work, producing for themselves and exchanging goods with other villages on a co-operative basis (Birchall, 1997: 4). This was taken in a new direction in 1844 by the Rochdale Pioneers, “28 men –some of them weavers, some skilled workers in related trades– who got together to form a co-operative society which led them to open a shop”, and who became successful because of “their use of the dividend on purchases to reward members not as workers but as consumers” (Birchall 1997: 3-5); from that moment on, and despite moments of crisis, the co-operative movement became a recognised part of British society, and came to be regarded as an example to follow around the world. More importantly for the purposes of this work, beyond its direct economic implications the

project also created a sense of identity for many members of the working and middle classes, introducing them into the world of capitalistic conglomerates and markets' competition while proposing within this frame an understanding of society based more on democratic equanimity than hierarchical impositions of rules.

Considering that it was one of the locations that inspired it, it is not surprising that the movement developed as well in Brighton: as Tim Carder wrote in his *Encyclopaedia of Brighton*, "the Brighton 'Co-op' was founded at a meeting at the Coffee Palace, 29 Duke Street, on 26 November 1887" (Carder, 2007b). After a relatively slow start, "by 1914 it had risen to 4414 [members] and after the war increased rapidly to 10000 by 1921 when other Sussex societies had been absorbed"; more importantly, "the 1920s and '30s saw a large expansion in operations, and the 'Co-op' played an important part in the lives of many of the poorer inhabitants of the town, organising social and sporting events as well as providing dividends for its members and value-for-money shopping" (Carder, 2007b). This means that *Before I sleep's* location was an emblem of a period of success achieved during the interwar period; a 'golden era' of cooperativism that revealed similar shades and ambiguities to the ones presented in late Chekhovian dramaturgy, more specifically in *The Cherry Orchard*. On the one hand, the blossoming Co-op movement could be read as "the inevitable development of Lopakhin's vision of economic development (...), [mirroring] the homogenization of an increasingly globalised world that needs to cater for a fast-developing urban population" (dreamthinkspeak, 2010: 2); it could represent the economic success of the country and the imposition of capitalist structures inside the socio-cultural space. But at the same time, and contradictorily, "Trofimov might have grudgingly approved of it, [because of its] democratic governance structure that strives to devolve decision-making amongst its members and [its] embrace of fair-trade initiatives" (dreamthinkspeak, 2010: 2): the same concept could therefore be seen as an attempt to strengthen capitalist practices and as a predecessor of social projects that

defended more encompassing notions of national identity. Thus, just as the cherry orchard of the play, the building revealed itself as a protean symbol that could either indicate the imposition of economic values over humanist ones, or the defence of socially enriching discourses during different periods of the historical development of the country.

To further enrich these meanings, the later development of the venue must be considered as well: a slow decay that eventually led to its closure in 2008, that is, two years before the premier of *Before I sleep*. With this, the significations mentioned above gained an extra value due to the passage of time and the power of nostalgia: whether it had been real or not, the ‘golden era’ of the place had been left behind, replaced by an uncertain future that at the time pointed towards “a regeneration scheme proposed for the London Road area that will knock down many existing buildings and build new apartments, offices and a new supermarket superstore belonging to a bigger, better-known global retailer” (dreamthinkspeak, 2010: 2).¹⁴⁷ Despite promises of better futures, the only reality was that the store –just like the cherry orchard– was meant to disappear, leaving behind a trail of stories, anecdotes and remembrances that inspired the show’s creators and influenced the interpretations of potential spectators who were aware of them; the opposition between a successful past and an uncertain present mirrored in many ways the situation not only of Brighton but of the whole country when it came to the understanding of its own national identity through the prism of individual and social memory. What was better: to embrace a retrospectively positive reading of the past, to accept it with all of its contradictions, or to simply ignore it and focus on the turmoil of the present and the unpredictability of the future? The possibilities were diverse, mainly

¹⁴⁷ This plan was not meant to be: after the dreamthinkspeak’s production the Co-op remained empty for the following three years, with the exception of a brief period in May 2012 when squatters preparing “for an international squatting convergence in the city involving activists from around the UK and France” occupied it (Parsons, 2012). In July 2013 “a joint application between the co-op, Watkin Jones and Sussex University” was approved by the council planning committee to build a new structure “behind the existing façade”, so it could be used “for 351 students’ flats” (Brighton Society, 2013); the scheme was finished in late 2014.

because –as Maria G. Cattell and Jacob J. Climo (2002: 1) wrote in *Social Memory and History*– “memory, whether individual or collective, is constructed and reconstructed by the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, shaped by semantic and interpretive frames, and subject to a panoply of distortions”. Because of this, dreamthinkspeak had at the beginning of the show’s production a myriad of past and present events and interpretations at its disposal; interestingly, the company tackled them not to offer immediate answers, but to create an ambiguous dramatic artefact that combined different time periods and perspectives in a surreal and poetic collage.

To investigate these historical and interpretative quandaries, the troupe used a specific dramatic style: immersive theatre. Originally created to describe “the visceral-visual, physical theatre of La Fura Dels Baus at the Royal Victoria Docks in 1983”, in 1995 this notion was explicitly applied “to *H.G.*, a performance installation created by Robert Wilson and Hans Peter Kuhn and produced by Artangel” (Machon, 2013: 63), a London-based arts organisation; going beyond previous smaller attempts in traditional theatre venues¹⁴⁸, shows such as these ones shaped the contemporary understanding of the term, defined by Josephine Machon (2013: 67-68) as a “practice which actually allows you to be in ‘the playing area’ with the performers, physically interacting with them, [creating a] lived(d), *present* experience, [with] the participant’s physical body responding within an imaginative environment”. Audience participation was then reinforced within the theatrical arena thanks to this performance style, which ‘opened up’ the stage and turned it into a more active character, allowing spectators to explore it in previously impossible ways. Of course, as Gareth White developed, “not all immersive theatre is audience participatory, and not all audience participation is immersive theatre” (White, 2013: 169); even in elaborate stagings in expansive

¹⁴⁸ Machon describes how “interdisciplinary, sensory and participatory performance work” was already present in progressive theatrical spheres before the term ‘immersive theatre’ was coined. For more information, including her analysis of pioneer companies like Welfare State and Oily Cart, please refer to *Immersive Theatres*, pp. 64-65.

venues, a controlled environment where viewers would never interact with actors or change a predetermined route could be preserved, preventing the demands “made in the simultaneity of performance and reception that comes with accepting an invitation and being a participant” (White, 2013: 174). But if the possibilities of the medium were explored to its fullest, through creations that allowed a more direct participation, this type of theatre could serve to express more freely social ambiguities and poetic contradictions, and introduce the voices of the spectators to the theatrical fabric.

Appearing in the late 1990s, dreamthinkspeak was not the first troupe to implement the immersive style, but its steady commitment to it made it one of the first in the UK (alongside fellow company Punchdrunk) to exclusively dedicate its shows to this particular style of performance. From there, it created an approach that mixed “production processes, cultural spaces, intertexts, media, and spectator engagement” (Lavender, 2016: 60) in a process of artistic hybridisation where fourth-wall audio-visual narrative –with its plot conventions, characters and/or psychological development– was only part of a bigger aesthetic endeavour that aimed for a total work of art that mirrored the ‘real’ world beyond the walls of the venue. This interest might be connected to Tristan Sharps’ fascination for “visual art and architecture before [he] was really aware of theatre”, mainly because “galleries and buildings were places where [he] could feel space and freedom” (McLaren, 2012), becoming then unfinished canvases filled with artistic inspirations and staging potentialities. Added to the plasticity offered by actors moving in a three-dimensional space, these arts also allowed him to conceive dramatic constructions where architectural elements like windows and walls, or man-made objects like a table or a bed, acquired unexpected practical uses and symbolical resonances. As he pointed out, “I always have an array of visual images attached to any one idea as I mull it over. But when I get shown a building, (...) the ideas start to take shape around the specific details of these spaces” (McLaren, 2012). Personal images and remembrances intermingled with historical

memories of the intervened venues; in the act of creation there was a reflection on how specific locations could inspire the company's work, reinforcing a dialogue with the surroundings and their cultural signification that otherwise would have been more limited or non-existent. In the specific case of *Before I sleep*, as the programme indicated, "while certain details of Russian design pervade, with Shishkin and Tarkovsky inspired visual elements infiltrating the film and photography, we have looked more to the local Georgian and Edwardian design for inspiration" (dreamthinkspeak, 2010: 3-4). This means that even at this early stage of development an intercultural dialogue was already proposed, recognising 'foreign' aesthetic forces as creative inspirations (as would be expected in a work inspired by *The Cherry Orchard*), while at the same time embracing the necessity to interact with local history and arts in order to achieve a more comprehensive dramatic impact.

Another important element of the troupe's aesthetics, according to the declarations quoted above, was the recognition of "space and setting as palimpsestic, accumulating different layers of function, meaning and aesthetic presentation" (Lavender, 2016: 67). Due to his background in architecture, Sharps converted corridors, rooms, doors, basements and bathrooms into indispensable elements of his theatrical pieces. In the case of *Before I sleep*, for example, reviewer Kate Kellaway (2010) mentioned how the entrance to the show was "at the back" of the Co-op building, in a desolate parking area "where lorry drivers would once have reported for duty"; and critic Maxie Szalwinska (2010) mentioned how at the beginning "an old man ushered you down an ominously dark corridor" which led to "the boarded-up house of the Ranevsky family after all the cherry trees had been chopped down". Both locations introduced central issues: the former suggested to approach the production not as a *fait accompli*, a finished concoction created for entertainment purposes, but as an adventurous creation focused on the hidden or undervalued 'backstage' of society; meanwhile, the latter served as an *Alice in Wonderland*-esque entrance to a "dark maze of corridors and mouldering chambers" (Bassett, 2010) that held unspoken remembrances and current desolations.

Emptiness, in fact, was celebrated throughout the four floors of the old shopping mall: dreamthinkspeak emphasised its ruinous state, reinforcing the vastness of the bare halls and missing doors by allowing visitors to roam around nearly the entirety of the location while adding projections, music, doll's houses, toys, furniture or silent dramatic performances that created "a sense of scale and a pervasive atmosphere of dilapidation or commercial functionalism" (Lavender, 2016: 67). A total artistic intervention took over what had been a centre of economic cooperation, reinforcing and creating "sites of memory (...), mnemonic sites and practices –language, songs, and ceremonies, bodies and bodily practices, places and things" (Cattell & Climo, 2002: 17) that aimed to trigger spectator's memories about the building, Brighton and the British nation. A tapestry of symbols reflected the challenges in the construction of both local and national identities, revealing once more the value of Chekhov's characters and plots as well-established and inspiring aesthetic discourses.

To increase the emotional response, "the audience filtered into the building in small groups", avoiding overcrowding while "immediately heightening the intimacy of the experience" (Venning, 2010) and adding an edge of disorientation and isolation. After that, as mentioned above, the show introduced a figure dressed with 19th century clothes, interpreted by reviewers as "the ancient servant Firs, abandoned at the end of Chekhov's play" (Logan, 2010); lying on a bed inside a small chamber lit by a small candle, he greeted newcomers in Russian, showed them through a window a group of supermarket customers with trolleys, and finally forced them to leave through a door that led to "the ground door of the building, which is dressed to evoke Firs' old life" (Logan, 2010). It was an evocative start that behind its brevity and surreal qualities offered many keys to interpret one of the most important themes of the piece: the challenging relationship between the present and the many contesting readings of the past. Indeed, and taking into consideration that Firs was in Chekhov's original the reminder of a bygone era of serfdom and stronger hierarchical control of the

tsarist government, his presence at the beginning and later reappearances in other places of the building as a meandering 'ghost' behind mannequins or as the main character of various short films, were an indication of the tangible presence and "dynamic processes of memory, processes that include remembering and forgetting, contestation of memories, and the search for truth and justice through reconciliation and redress" (Cattell & Climo, 2002: 3). Chekhovian imagery was respected and at the same time reconfigured to study the city of Brighton and the building's history; the servant became an ambivalent symbol that embodied the achievements of the Co-op and its dramatic decadence, the inequalities existing at the time of its inception, the impossibility to return to the past and the necessity to create new social understandings. Also, by positioning a supporting figure of the original story as the main character of the new production, *Before I sleep* shifted the cultural focus from the aristocrats –who had been the main interest of traditional productions– to the subordinates, the 'others' whose socio-politic views were previously undervalued or rejected. If this is connected to the mnemonic processes of memory referred above, it could be said that this decision validated "identities that have been historically marginalized or oppressed", and revised "potential imbalances in the power dynamics between communities" (Harvie, 2005: 41).

Following this idea, the creators of the show dedicated the first two floors of the production (the basement and the ground floor) to a thorough exploration of the past: a past that mixed Chekhov's iconography with unique aesthetic flourishes to present an ironically dreamy view of days of aristocratic and hierarchical grandeur. Powerful images were offered through diverse setups: "a miniature, snow-covered landscape at your feet, (...) stretches away into the distance. A winter wind moans and a tiny mansion – like an antique doll's house – twinkles in a wood. A winding path also leads you on through this wilderness, past a glowing mini-mart, with a corpse, the size of your little finger, sprawled on its threshold" (Bassett, 2010). This seemingly random assembly of figures created in fact several leitmotifs used throughout the production: the wintery atmosphere, the use

of doll's houses that echoed the architecture of the rooms where they were located¹⁴⁹, and the contrast between 'civilisation' and 'nature', among other important images, recalled themes and locations used by Chekhov in his work, while simultaneously emphasising the powerlessness of human efforts against the passage of time and the impossibility of an immovable social identity. Also, the use of short dramatic sketches, played by one or two actors repeating over and over again identical actions behind glass walls or wooden windows, highlighted an "afterlife that keeps jumping between remembered golden moments from Ranyevskaya's bygone era (...) and more premonitory visions (...) [of] communist, post-communist, and possibly post-capitalist set-ups emerging and decaying" (Bassett, 2010). One of these representations was particularly striking: two aristocrats, probably echoes of Ranevskaya and her brother Gayev, drank coffee at a veranda before painfully realizing that they were not only trapped inside a glass case like insects in an entomology museum, but also observed by curious spectators on the other side. Superficially, this moment only reinforced the traditional reading of a nostalgic attraction for a lost and 'better' time; something reinforced by "Max Richter's looped string music" that made "the sense of decay ever more persuasive" (Maxwell, 2010) and recalled the 'breaking string' sound that the characters heard throughout the play. However, the fact that the characters understood their own theatricality, and their mechanical quality that rendered them incapable of choosing a different outcome, indicated that dreamthinkspeak's desire was to reveal how entrapping and ultimately sterile these notions of aristocratic control truly were. Following Jen Harvie, these dramatic decisions showed the negative effects of memories, which "may define other communities as inherently inferior and omit or forget

¹⁴⁹ The most elaborate of these doll's houses was a meticulous reproduction of the Co-op building, which included all of its stairs, rooms and doors, reproduced the dreamthinkspeak's installations and located various Firs' dolls on different locations. This served to interweave once more Chekhov-inspired imagery with the poetic memories of the building's history, speaking "to a childlike curiosity about these worlds, and play[ing] on the idea of a world within a world that has its own dimensions" (Machon, 2013: 125). Also, it echoed the servant's physical wandering around the performative space, reinforcing in the mind of the spectators his symbolic quality as the pervasive power of the past.

features that trouble the image of itself a community is striving to create” (Harvie, 2005: 41). By revealing the futility of a dependence on the past, the presentation asked audiences to reflect on the negative results of its idealization, in a particularly resonant message at a time when national identity was still occasionally defined by a celebration of bygone eras as moments of social ‘unity’.

This recognition of memory’s ambiguous qualities was also clear in the creation of evocative spaces where the wanderer had the chance to interact and discover hidden elements that added new meanings to the production. One example was a series of rooms that represented a 19th century countryside house: an ornate reading table, some old dolls and a music box with a couple waltzing in evening dress were scattered in a seemingly haphazard fashion. Every one of them, though, suggested interesting connections: the dolls were dressed in a similar fashion to the aristocrats behind the glass case, symbolically reinforcing their position as childish and underdeveloped figures incapable of adapting to a context of rapid transformations (a message already implied in *The Cherry Orchard*); the dancing couple established another recurrent visual motif that served to indicate again the passage of time. Even more revealingly, one of the drawers of the table hid “a handwritten Russian recipe for cherry jam” (Todd, 2010), which reminded readers of *The Cherry Orchard* of a dialogue uttered by Firs regarding the former glory of the estate and its later decadence as expressed by the disappearance of a traditional jam recipe; this was connected to another image later in the show, when an “Ikea display cupboard [revealed] row upon mass-produced row of Hartley’s Best black cherry jam” (Todd, 2010). This created a contrast that explored both the decay of old discourses, whose sources of economic power were now forgotten and lost, and the commoditisation of capitalist forces that threatened to destroy human bonds in favour of self-centred achievements. Also, the fact that spectators had to investigate to find these connections revealed the degree of participation that was expected from them, turning them into “some tiny extent at least, an actor” who had to “accept an obligation to support a fictional circumstance, and

to present themselves appropriately, to move forward with the action and move it forward” (White, 2013: 171)¹⁵⁰. Through these defining elements, dreamthinkspeak asked participants to use their own cultural capital to unravel the significations of the performative events that they discovered, turning them into active figures whose own discourses added to the intercultural universe presented by the work, which mixed Russia, Brighton and Britain with the many other cultural discourses brought by the spectators themselves.

Participation, in fact, was the focus of the second part of the work, located in the second floor of the building. On it, after going up a flight of stairs, viewers were led to a vast room where a department store called ‘Millennium Retail’ seemed to have just opened, packed with electrical appliances and many other products; after exploring the world of Firs’ memories, so intimately connected with the preservation of traditional discourses, *Before I sleep* rebuilt the co-operative past of the building by updating it to the standards of a shiny and contemporary shopping mall. As one critic wrote, “as you walk in, you wonder if you’re back to your own reality, to our times. Are we on the wrong floor? Is this part of the building used for something else?” (Lazar, 2010). But this feigned ‘realism’ came with a twist: around the newcomers “Russian/German/Italian/Japanese” shop assistants created a “multilingual” troupe that competed to sell merchandise without uttering a word in English, leading some national speakers to fall “into the role of Brit abroad” (Maxwell, 2010). Continuing with the idea of the spectator as an actor, this section toyed with “the potential awkwardness of the encounter between an in-character actor, and an audience participant who is being treated as also in-character” (White, 170), in order to transmit the difficulties of intercultural exchange, but not only abroad as the reviewer implied, but also *inside* the country. Altogether, these factors contributed to enrich the exploration about national identity: at a time of free markets and

¹⁵⁰ Considering dreamthinspeak’s abstract style, ‘action’ should not be understood here as a lineal narrative construction but rather as an advancement of ideas and emotions in brief, atomised performances.

fluid immigration, the show presented the status of contemporary UK, with 'locals' and 'foreigners' mixed together in the middle of a competitive society. At first glance, this could be read as an appraisal of the powers of capitalism and its democratic 'progress' over the monarchical discourses referred to earlier in the show; but the presence of "the spooky world of a dummy-store (...) behind the curtain of a dressing room" (A.B., 2010), and the "muttering figure" (A.B., 2010) of Firs wandering in the darker corners of the store, pointed instead towards a murkier truth that connected old and modern discourses as expressions of power and subjugation, where cultural intermingling was more an economic necessity than a meaningful attempt to create intercultural communication. The glossy world of the department store acquired then a nightmarish quality, uncovering the risk of social fragmentation into a Babelian world full of prejudices and misunderstandings. Emphasising this was the already mentioned transformation of cherry trees into commercialised jam: a natural symbol was turned into a part of an "auction floor in a real Babylon style scene", where "you can even grab a bargain from the Cherry Orchard house" (Lazar, 2010). The past was not only vanishing but also being slowly sold out to the highest bidder; competing cultures overlapped with an aggressive consumerism that threatened to turn them into profitable commodities.

The risks of savage commoditisation continued in the remaining part of the floor, which further explored the themes already touched upon in the 'department store' room. First, a series of projections and television screens presented images where Firs, now holding "an undelivered teacup, as he was no longer able to find his masters" (Lazar, 2010), was edited alongside the faces of the employers of the 'Millennium Retail'¹⁵¹: a past of subjugation was superimposed on the

¹⁵¹ This title was by no means casual: it toyed with the turn-of-the-century fears and uncertainties present in Chekhov's plays, as well as those experienced by many before and just after the arrival of the 21st century. Was the cherry orchard's sale a verification that some of the omens of human decay had been proven right?

alienating power of consumerist ‘progress’, indicating the transformations of the country in the past 70 years, and how the ebb and flow of purchase and sale of even the most intimate memories seemed to have become the core of social exchange. By doing this, dreamthinkspeak also indicated the “cumulative and continuous, and on the other hand, changing, provisional, malleable, and contingent” power of social memory (Cattell & Climo, 2002: 25); the nature of national identity, with its battle between movement and stasis, was apparently presented in the increasingly chaotic coexistence of the old-fashioned imagery and objects with the aforementioned audio-visual content. This symbolically reflected the situation presented outside the venue’s walls, with the streets mixing both 19th and 21st century buildings in a gradually diverse architectural landscape; the mixture of the old-fashioned and the new, of traditional performative tricks and contemporary technology, emphasised the different historical layers negotiated by the production, where *The Cherry Orchard*’s presentation of the fallibilities of the landowning generation was combined with the recognition of the contradictions of the co-op project, and the initial collectivist interests of the shopping mall were put in an ambiguous dialogue with the excesses of neoliberalism. Ultimately, this mixture “served the sensual” values of the production and added “to the opacity and depth, sensory invitation and discovery, mystery and shadow inherent in the site” (Machon, 2013: 128).

Among this ambivalence, the show moved towards its third and final section, which comprised the end of the third floor, the fourth one and the exit: one dedicated to the questioning of the future of the venue, and by extension of Brighton and the rest of the country. An image heralded the arrival of this theme: the replacement of the traditional-looking doll’s houses of the first floor –with their depictions of old countryside houses– with small-scale models that represented apartment complexes with impersonal white rooms, minimalistic furniture and a symmetrical central staircase. Taking into consideration the then uncertain prospects of the Co-op, with Brightonians wondering if “it will be flats; a Wetherspoons; home to a global retailer” (Todd, 2010), this could be read as a

representation of the possible future developments of the building, with its collaborative values eradicated in favour of a celebration of individual success and urban estrangement. At the same time, it offered an answer to a question often presented in Chekhovian dramaturgy: as director Tristan Sharps put it in a video interview, “in the plays of Chekhov, you often find that the characters in those plays are looking to the future and they are wondering what the future generations will make of them, and they are wondering what the future generations will be like” (Brighton Theatre Festival 2010, 2010). If these anonymous environments were to be believed as the inevitable developments of Britain, the result of all past troubles and wishes seemed to be only indifference in the middle of a society without co-operative values. It should not be ignored here, though, the ironic qualities of this view: the fact that the elegant new building was a miniature in the middle of derelict walls and spaces, with Lilliputian inhabitants hopelessly trapped by their bright surroundings, revealed that these ‘ideal’ dreams were as misguided as a nostalgic return to the past or a hedonistic celebration of a commercialised present. More than ever, the show supported “the act of being a spectator-participant in the midst of performance, (...) who can choose her own journey through a piece” (Lavender, 2016: 177); that is, a participative attitude that confronted audiences with the shortcomings of their own world and asked them to think about how their own version of the future would (or should) be.

Strengthening this idea, the couple of dancing lovers presented at the beginning returned, this time linked to two connected motifs: water and divers. To understand them, the first section of the production must be reconsidered: there, behind a narrow window, a scuba diver came out of the darkness and slowly, as if struggling against a powerful stream of water, got closer to the spectator, waved and knocked the glass before disappearing again in the shadows. It was a hypnotic image that started a chain of interpretative reactions: reviewer Veronica Lazar (2010) indicated how it “makes you (...) discover yourself trapped in the Cherry Orchard house, like in a submarine. This is

the moment when you understand that the Cherry House is underwater, where the water is a spatial symbol". Certainly, the presence of this liquid indicated a world submerged in a sea of memories and remembrances; in fact, it served as a powerful representation of the past, connected to primal origins and life but also to stifling forces, where scuba divers explored 'depths' that led to positive revelations or asphyxiating burdens. Together, both elements became recurrent images that, as the show moved to the present and later on into the future, suggested the pervasive power of memory. This might partly explain the context of the final reappearance of the dancing couple first seen inside the music box, now submerged in an aquarium surrounded by red curtains and equipped with diving suits: what was before a suggestion of aristocratic pleasures became an evocation of the struggle to keep alive not so much the socio-political past but an idealised version of it, that is, a romanticised perspective that preserved hierarchical and imperial national discourses. Also, in an indication of the ambivalent qualities of the production's symbolism(s), the same object provided a comment on the possible future effects of climate change, prefigured by Chekhov's ecological preoccupations: an obsession for economic success could lead to a quasi-dystopian outcome where any cultural or intimate connection between individuals was meant to 'drown' in an environmental and social disaster. Ultimately, this redefinition of previously presented imagery supported the hybridity of the entire theatrical event: as the director described, "I find it very interesting that now, a century on, with the span of the 20th century between us, we are now in the future and we can look back at the characters looking forward to us. And our show is the place where those two viewpoints meet" (Brighton Theatre Festival 2010, 2010). This encounter of different spaces and cultures (to which could be added the future), and its transformation into physical spaces, was the greatest achievement of *Before I sleep*; as Machon indicated, "with this piece the many layers of architectural interiors served to fuse past, present and future, and make manifest Pallasmaa's notion of time that is at once held, evaded and exploded" (Machon, 2013: 129).

Time, in fact, became in itself a character that could be seen and touched in every corner. In the wrinkles of the actor playing Firs, the torn wallpaper of some walls, the re-contextualisation of symbols, there was an underlying recognition of the transformation of physical objects and discourses; the presence of “a table (...) thickly covered in half-melted candles” (Kellaway, 2010) denoted a funereal melancholy at the impossibility of stopping this inexorable process, while at the same time implying its sense of wonder and beauty. As in Chekhov’s plays, all emotions were left behind and maybe forgotten, leaving the space open to new generations and an intriguing future; as it happened in Brighton’s and Britain’s history, previous times of political success or failure were replaced by a period of cultural diversity with its own social complexities. Every event of the production allowed “qualities of time *to be perceived* that ranged across the temporal, sensual and conceptual” (Machon, 2013: 39): an encompassing aesthetic effort reconfigured an abandoned building into a liminal space that posed critical perspectives regarding diverse historical eras, without attempting to discredit or revere any of them. Also, this mingling of times exposed how the depredations of consumerism went beyond human beings and affected the natural world too: *Before I sleep*’s juxtaposed worlds established “an ecological care” that warned about “progress that circles back on itself; and histories we may be doomed to repeat” (Logan, 2010). Some items emphasised this element: a miniature forest of cherry trees seen at the beginning, for example, was turned into a desolate group of tree stumps that covered a room at the end of the show. There was an unnerving quality in the comparison of these two sights, which in their stark simplicity reminded spectators of the possible (but by no means inevitable) results of predatory progress. Doctor Astrov’s warnings in *Uncle Vanya* in defence of the forests seemed to have fallen on deaf ears; and the UK, in its urban expansionism and gentrification, risked to crossing an invisible line and losing some of the natural (and, symbolically, cultural) legacies that were part of its territory.

Not that this implied an unreserved celebration of the past. Quite the opposite: right before the tree stumps' room, a lost Firs became the sole protagonist of a looped video that showed him walking in a forest, before falling asleep (or dying) in the middle of a small remote island. Did this suggest that the title *Before I sleep* was a reference to this moment, with all the events the spectators witnessed before being a mixture of the old butler's day-dreams, memories and observations? With its characteristic ambiguity, the show did not reveal if that was the case or if the answer held a wider signification where the 'I' was the spectator himself. In any case, what's clear is that Firs' last appearance underscored how "individual and collective memory come together in the stories of individual lives" (Cattell & Climo, 2002: 22), that is, how through the emotional voyage of one specific character, with his mixture of literary and historical symbolism, it was possible to reflect on the social transformations of Brighton and the UK¹⁵² and think about that future that was still inaccessible and waiting to be fully built.¹⁵³ Also, taking into consideration that at this latter stage all actors were supplanted by projections and television screens, the visual sequence seemed to imply the demise of that idea of the past that had haunted all the previous floors, connected to an 'untouched' nature: a perspective connected to an understanding of national identity focused on a 'bucolic' past of green hills and shepherd's songs that, despite its romantic-poetic echoes¹⁵⁴, was unmasked here as an insular view that could lead to an estrangement from the global stage and a

¹⁵² The opposite was equally reinforced, of course: as Cattell and Climo (2002: 22) developed, "the process of constructing a life story is heavily mediated by social construction; for example, it usually occurs in a social setting that shapes the stories told".

¹⁵³ The connection between the local and the national arena was accomplished mostly through the choice of the Co-op building as the location of the production: by using its rise, development, demise and future as the centre of the show, *Before I sleep* transcended Brighton and presented problematics that were relevant for (and referred to) the entire nation.

¹⁵⁴ A contemporary play that celebrated this discourse was the already mentioned Royal Court hit *Jerusalem*, which through the eviction of the main character (the white, never-do-well Rooster Johnny Byron) suggested the tragic disappearance of "the olde myth of Deep England, rural, pagan and dreamy" (Sierz, 2011: 141). As Dominic Cavendish (2010) commented, the spectacle of the last 'true' Englishman "borders on something which, for all the comedy, I found disquieting when watching it recently in the company of a mixed-race audience. We're an explosive whiff away from the sentiment: 'England for the English!'".

long-term cultural weakening. A reversal of progress was then as inappropriate as an uncritical acceptance of consumerism: both approaches created hierarchical structures that prevented intercultural dialogues and the construction of stronger social bonds between local communities.

Thus, Chekhov's imagery and characters, which had been used in other shows to preserve established discourses, acquired in *Before I sleep* an ambivalence whose interpretation changed depending on their position around the building, as well as on their common correlation and communication. Of course, those who were not aware of the plots and main themes of *The Cherry Orchard* or *Uncle Vanya* did not necessarily understand all the interpretative suggestions of the show; but the fact that the show was recurrently promoted by Brighton Festival as inspired by the Russian author's last play at least partly ensured that this connection did not pass unnoticed to many viewers. So, even though dreamthinspeak aimed for a reading of its creation without many preconceptions –for example, by handing over the programme only at the end of the show–, Chekhov's recurrent allusion actually reaffirmed his recognition as a staple member of the national theatrical tradition: taken now as a given, the company built on his iconic symbols (the cherry orchard, the aristocratic couple, the old butler, the destroyed forest, the opposition between city and countryside), and mixed them with images inspired by the company's aesthetics and local idiosyncrasies to explore socio-political issues. Chekhovian discourse, 'tamed' in other theatrical productions, recovered a protean quality that made it ideal to express the possibilities faced by Brighton and the nation, while delving into "the meanings of culture, social memory, and history (...), especially in regard to identity and hegemonic relations and recovery of the past –including hidden and repressed pasts" (Cattell & Climo, 2002: 36). To summarise: in order to start thinking about a society's future cultural dialogue, it was necessary to reconsider its past by including those voices that had been rejected, erased or minimised from the historic-aesthetic discourse.

Before I sleep, however, never attempted to answer how exactly the future should be: following once more Chekhov's lead, and more specifically *The Cherry Orchard's* example, it remained in a liminal space where all times met, with past and present being rewritten and criticised at the same time, and the future presented as a mass of possibilities. That's why the real closure of the show took place when, having left the orchards' stumps room, spectators had to go down through an internal staircase –perhaps the same one hinted in previous miniatures– and reflect on what they had just seen before leaving the building. As Machon (2013: 95) wrote, "in these contiguous spaces (such as peripheral corridors and stairwells) where a designed soundscape is absent, one becomes bristlingly aware of the sounds of others' footsteps, of the intrinsic smells of the environment, of the strangeness of inhabiting the wider space. Rather than drawing you out of the experience, it engages you further within it". On this context, this meant that even though the dramatic events were over, the last silent connection between building and viewer overflowed with symbolical insights, intertwining personal memories with the historical past of the Co-op and the questions implied by dreamthinkspeak's intervention. What were the general conclusions, what was the best course to follow for both regional communities and the nation at large? That was up to each audience member to discern. But one thing was certain: if society –as represented by that microcosm of performances, doll's houses and projections– was to move forward, it was necessary to embrace a view of culture that could recognise both old forces and progressive readings. As Bella Todd (2010) suggested, the show had "a political purpose. Door signs throughout identif[ied] 'the way forward' and finally 'the way back'", confronting viewers "with a timely choice". The Babel Tower of isolation and cultural mistrust, *Before I Sleep* advocated, had to be confronted through the

construction of a world where exchange acquired a primary role.¹⁵⁵ Only in that way could intercultural agreement be reached, and a construction of new communities and societies began.

4. Conclusion

Despite their different approaches, *Chekhov in Hell* and *Before I sleep* indicated Chekhov's pervasive influence within the UK's dramatic universe: by turning him into the main character of a new drama, as in the first case, or through the use of his imagery as a platform for an immersive and politically-committed production, as in the second, the Russian dramatist's relevance as an inspirer of national theatrical explorations was proved. Interestingly, though, this was not used here to present traditional identity readings –as in the contemporary 2010 Sam Mendes' staging of *The Cherry Orchard*– but to expose the plural qualities of a multicultural society where conventional readings of Britishness were confronted and put into dialogue with minority or previously unrecognised discourses. In a few words, whether it was through a linear written play or a more abstract audio-visual performance, Chekhovian forces were reinvigorated, offering a liminal space where intercultural forces coalesced in meaningful dialogues.

The already mentioned reinterpretation of the Russian author was therefore emphasised: using the connection between the writer and the national theatrical tradition, the two shows re-contextualised the past through fresh interpretations that revealed the ways it had been controlled and rewritten by imperial and/or hierarchised discourses. Also, based on the well-established conventions of British-Chekhovian dramaturgy, that after decades of successive performances many

¹⁵⁵ As implied in the presentation of critics' reviews, the show received unanimous recognition. Going beyond its inherent aesthetic qualities, the fact that reviewers of opposite political spectrums agreed with its transformative qualities uncovered how successfully its message of interaction was expressed.

members of the audience had come to embrace and accept, both shows recovered buried aspects of Chekhov's aesthetics: Rebellato's play seemed to be inspired by the satirical elements that were central to early Chekhovian sketches such as *The Bear* or *The Proposal*, while *Before I sleep* reinforced the ambiguity of late plays like *The Cherry Orchard*, capturing different social views without fully embracing any of them. The results were understandably different in tone, and received a dissimilar reception: the former, presented in two short seasons in a regional venue and in a small London theatre, was respectfully although un-glamorously embraced by critics, while the latter –commissioned by a well-known festival– became a hit that surpassed all expectations. Of course, it could be argued that Rebellato's play came short of its own ambitions due to the sketchiness of its plot and the lack of development of some of its characters, or that because of its allusive qualities dreamthinkspeak's show received more praise for its aesthetic appeal than because of a real understanding of its main themes. But beyond their flaws or accomplishments, what is valuable is how the two productions considered the polyphonic qualities of nation at the turn of the first decade of the 21st century, as well as the main questions that this variety posed for the future of British society. The answers, however, were not to be found in the shows themselves: in moments like the climactic dialogue between Chekhov and the prostitute in *Chekhov in Hell*, or in the poetic resonances of the butler dying alone in a remote island in the last projection of *Before I sleep*, both spectacles preferred to suggest the necessity of communication as a method of community building, perhaps considering that "identity [is not] something achieved and completed; rather, it is an ongoing process of construction of self and other and of social groups" (Cattell & Climo, 2002: 33).

In fact, the importance of these performances went beyond their position as preservers of the Chekhovian legacy within the UK: they revealed the power of tradition and memory, and used it to strengthen their own progressive ideological concerns. Following Marvin Carlson, the 'haunted

stage' (with its intertheatrical and socio-political echoes and experiences) was in the two cases not only recognised but actively encouraged: in the case of *Chekhov in Hell*, the character of Chekhov – who had become for some theatre-goers an iconic representation of well-mannered and tamed visions of identity– was re-embodied just like Shakespeare's Hamlet, reshaping "the cultural memory of the character according to [the new generation's] own abilities and orientation" (Carlson, 2001: 78), and therefore acquiring a critical perspective where a more encompassing view of cultural identity flourished. Meanwhile, in the case of *Before I sleep* not only the author and his imagery but also the location was reconstructed to provide more readings of the national 'character': so, when the critic Kate Kellaway (2010) overheard "Brighton citizens exclaiming over handrail and marble, reminiscing about the days when they hauled their buggies up the Co-op stairs", the Co-op "ghosted in the minds of the public that came there by whatever psychic or semiotic role [it had] played in the normal course of events" (Carson, 2001: 134). In other words, it offered socio-historical associations that dreamthinspeak used to transmit its reconfigured notions of identity where past, present and future collided and met. In both cases, cultural memory was used to challenge established discourses and to promote a transformative exchange where social understanding could only be the result of collective agreements.

Ultimately, the two productions celebrated multifaceted interpretations: through their seemingly disconnected and episodic constructions, they avoided the constraints of linear composition –with its risks of falling into a simple cause-effect development– and proposed instead "the experience of formalistic transformation [where] the audience-participant is able to fashion her own narrative and journey" (Machon, 2013: 63). The result was a physical and interactive interrogation of the spectators' preferences, who were forced to ask themselves about their own position within the social strata and to create connections with those 'others' with whom they shared the same social space. Following the intercultural scenario proposed in this thesis, *Chekhov in Hell* and *Before I sleep*

became artefacts that, without falling into an open (and possibly biased) political commitment, actively pursued a view of national identity based on a balanced cultural communication and recreation. In a few words, Rebellato and dreamthinkspeak created in the microcosm of their productions tapestries that recognised the complexities of modern British society while leaving viewers to find their own answers: an act of humanistic integrity.

Conclusion

As presented in the Introduction, this thesis had two interconnected interests: one, to explore the continuing importance of Anton Chekhov's work within the theatrical environment of the UK at the end of the first decade of the 21st century; and two, to reveal a series of socio-political and intercultural discourses that existed in contemporary British society through eight selected productions, from those still indirectly fixed in a monolithic imperial past as a base of social cohesion to those that presented previously disregarded 'others' as keys to the conformation of a plural sense of national identity. Altogether, the analysed shows also underlined the variety of theatrical styles found in the country, with their focus on the text (faithfully translated from the original or more liberally adapted), the body of the actor (capable to transmit interpretative subtexts) or the *mise-en-scène* (which reinforced characters or situations, or even proposed new readings inspired by the author's originals); by doing this, the necessity of recognising and embracing dissimilar aesthetic forces in order to build a more comprehensive view of British society was underlined, and a tapestry of voices was provided from where it was possible to extract –as it will be proved throughout these final pages– some general outlines useful for the understanding of dramatic processes of reception and reinterpretation, and a reconsideration of the possibilities offered by an intercultural national identity. A duo of argumentative conclusions will not only demonstrate for the last time the value of art to interpret and shape socio-political contexts, but also show the transcendence of the present research beyond the chronological constraints of its case-based, state-of-the-art structure.

The present conclusion will be therefore divided in four main sections. In the first one a short summary of the Chekhovian history of productions will recover the most representative moments of the Russian author's discourse within the UK throughout the 20th and 21st century. Based on this

historical evidence, the second section will propose a new general outline that hopefully will be useful to analyse the process of reception and reinterpretation of any given 'foreign' dramatic discourse in a nation, region or city (presented here as a 'geographic construct'). In the third section, in order to test the utility of this scheme in a case different than Chekhov's, the outline will be tentatively applied to the analysis of William Shakespeare's reception and evolution in Japan. Finally, the fourth section will present a final theoretical approximation to the notions of interculturalism and national identity, revealing how both must work together to build 'liminal identities' which, in their protean nature and constant transformation, will allow a stronger sense of commonality not only within the UK but in many other multicultural societies as well.

1. Chekhov in the UK: toward a theory of reception and reinterpretation

After more than a hundred years of British productions, by the end of the first decade of the 21st century Anton Chekhov had become an essential figure within the ever-changing dramatic world of the UK. Indeed, beyond the shows analysed in the previous chapters, between 2009 and 2011 other productions of his plays were presented all over the country. Some of them were: 2009 Dundee Rep's *The Cherry Orchard*, directed by Uzbek director Vladimir Bouchler, who exploited "the uncluttered space of Neil Warmington's set to build waves of movement", offsetting the characters' "head-in-the-sand inertia with a clown-like energy" (Fisher, M., 2009); 2010 "stripped down, Spartan and sonically strange" *Three Sisters*, co-directed by the then Lyric Hammersmith's director Sean Holmes and experimental troupe Filter (Billington, 2010b); and 2011 National Theatre's "unequivocally alive-and-kicking" *Cherry Orchard*, which transmitted despair with an "anarchic, Gogol-esque energy" and used a translation by Andrew Upton "that judder[ed] with robust, breezily anachronistic idioms" (Taylor, 2011). Naturally, an argument could be made that this variety was

partly the result of the 150th anniversary of Chekhov's birth in 2010, or that this expansion was not unique when taking into consideration other 'foreign' playwrights whose plays had been successfully embraced; as suggested before, a similar case could be constructed around Ibsen. What was striking about Chekhov was the depth of his recognition and the variety of authors who embraced him; only in the three-year period considered in the previous pages, it can be seen that a series of urban, regional, mainstream and fringe shows were presented. Also, it is remarkable how many other productions –beyond those analysed in the third and fourth chapter of this thesis– claimed to be inspired by the Russian author, without even keeping the original dialogues: examples were The Factory's 2009 reinterpretation of *The Seagull*, a "randomised, part-swapping show that relied on audience members bringing unusual objects to use as props", where "actors learnt the play as 'units of action' rather than memorising a part", loosely using the plot then to create their own improvisations (Hobby, 2009); and 2010 Finborough Theatre's *The Notebook of Trigorin*, a Tennessee Williams' rewriting of *The Seagull* where Trigorin was turned into a "bisexual, tethered to Madame Arkadina by habit and actively pursuing stable-boys on the Sorin estate" and Dorn became "a sadistic sensualist" (Billington, 2010c). At the end, these cases demonstrated how Chekhov had become both an aesthetically malleable artefact and a reliable commercial brand, which could be used to lure spectators to buy tickets for more experimental or obscure shows; simultaneously, in the diversity of creators working with his plays, and the radically different ways in which they were reinterpreted, there was an indirect yet powerful reference to the myriad of cultural voices that coexisted in early 21st century's UK, forming a complex and fluid notion of national identity.

A question arose: what were then the main characteristics that led to this general recognition of the Russian writer within the British territories, going beyond aesthetic, social and cultural differences? To find an answer, it is useful to reconsider the historical contextualisation presented above:

through it, it is clear that the process of assimilation (and, later, re-evaluation) of the Russian author did not happen immediately, but dealt with some drawbacks before reaching an initial development. Chekhov's first performance in the country, occurred in Glasgow, received critical support but did not immediately lead to a stream of presentations of the author; the amateur productions of Chekhovian satiric sketches in London during the 1910s and early 1920s were successfully presented to small groups of connoisseurs but remained invisible to the general public. All together, these shows demonstrated how difficult it was the approximation to the then new discourses represented by Chekhov's plays, due to their ground-breaking aesthetic qualities (such as the reduction of plot devices and the use of pauses and subtexts to convey meaning) and their 'foreign' qualities within a new cultural background. Nevertheless, an uneasy dialogue between these works of art and new local audiences –described from this point onwards as *target audiences*, partly inspired by Pavis' concept of "target cultures" (1992: 7)– had been established, leading eventually to Komisarjevsky's 1926 productions, which reinterpreted the material in a way that fitted some historic-cultural necessities.

This moment of public and critical recognition led to an initial assimilation of the Russian author in the country, but by no means was the final step of the process. Historical evidence revealed how Chekhov's interpretation was focused at first on a reading where nostalgia for a fading Empire, added to a desire to return to the past, led to a theatrical reverence for aristocratic characters. Cases such as the 1943 Old Vic production or the 1965 Chichester Festival show were representative of this trend, which kept Chekhov in the theatrical spotlight thanks to their commercially successful stars (including Laurence Olivier and Peggy Ashcroft, among others) and high production values; at the same time, however, it limited the reinterpretations and the audiences of the dramas beyond the circle of the social class that had originally embraced him. At this point his dramaturgy could have become a commodity useful to preserve traditional values yet incapable of accommodating

different perspectives; the real test of the author's penetration came when new generations of directors, playwrights and actors finally confronted this inherited tradition. The result, which could have led to a demonstration of Chekhov's limitations, ended up being a proof of his long-lasting appeal: a combination of international productions and fresh local interpretations coming from young artists, as well as the diversification of fringe theatres and regional identities, heralded rewarding reinterpretations of Chekhovian drama. Marxist Chekhov, postmodern Chekhov, postcolonial Chekhov: all these readings surged from the early 1960s onwards, reflecting the social transformations of the country and the flexibility of the Russian author's plays to encompass different perspectives within their characters and plots. Proof of this can be found too in the amount of shows that combined, rewrote or took inspiration from him, which also cropped up more frequently after this point: from smash hits such as *Wild Honey* at the National Theatre in 1984, to the experimental rewritings of The Factory, 'Chekhoviana' became embedded within the British dramatic world, serving like any other national author as a source of inspiration for new creations and young local artists.

From this point, in fact, his work went beyond one-sided assimilation, responding not to the necessities of a specific generation or class but offering interpretative possibilities to a vast array of social and aesthetic backgrounds: despite the continuation of traditional reading of his works, Chekhov was rediscovered too as a multivalent character that could not be fully grasped or definable by one specific reading. One question then emerged: were these processes of initial reticence, first acceptance and assimilation, decadence and/or commodification, and revival throughout new generations and artistic trends the necessary steps for an author to become not only an intercultural figure, but also a recognised symbol within his adopted country? To answer this question, the analysis must be taken one step forward by signalling how these abovementioned historical stages can be used as a platform to create a more abstract yet precise outline, which in turn can be useful

in understanding the complexities that lie in the adoption of a foreign aesthetic discourse by a different target audience.

The following schema, then, transcends two thematic interests of this work: British national identity and Chekhovian dramaturgy. At first sight, this could be perceived as an unexpected or even unnecessary development, due to its apparent distance from many of the arguments that have been presented up to this point; however, as discussed below, there are important reasons to justify its inclusion here. First of all, it must be underlined the interest expressed throughout this work in the processes of dramatic reception and reinterpretation, which are presented either through the historical evolution of 'foreign' theatrical discourses inside one geographical territory (e.g., British Chekhovian dramaturgy from the early 20th century onwards), or through the constant and overlapping reinterpretations of these discourses at specific points of time (for example, Chekhov's plays presented between 2009 and 2011): under this scenario, this outline becomes a natural theoretical conclusion of these interests. Connected to this, it must be mentioned how, thanks to the intertheatrical analysis of the many productions presented or alluded in this work, a series of common developmental patterns seemed to surface, leading to the creation of a tentative proposal of specific stages of reception, assimilation and reinterpretation of dramatic discourses which aims to shed light on how these processes unfold and are maintained throughout the years, not only in regard to the UK and Anton Chekhov but also in other geographic territories and playwrights.

For the organisational purposes of this chapter, it is also important to signal how the framework proposed below underlines once more the different (yet always present) degrees of intercultural hybridisation that occur every time a play is 'transplanted' to a different society, and how each production possesses socio-political undercurrents that reveal specific conceptions of any nation's identity. Therefore, by presenting the schema here, rather than leaving it as an appendix, a

continuity of all these themes will be highlighted, and a proper theoretical closure to the dramatic angle of this research will be reached before returning to a social consideration of interculturalism and national identity, which will constitute the last section of this conclusion.

On a more personal note, it must be pointed out how the outline responds to an already mentioned interest to find a series of abstract elements that transcend the case-based quality of the analysis. Being a Colombian researcher, interested in the processes of cultural communication and social dialogue at a time of post-civil war reconciliation, it was very important to go beyond the framework of Chekhov and the UK and to extrapolate some of the academic findings discovered in this work into an exploratory framework useful for other territories, cultural spaces and/or target audiences. In a world affected by reactionary interpretative perspectives, where right-wing nationalisms and extremist religious groups propose aggressive defences of 'established' and 'traditional' values, leading to an economic, political and aesthetic promotion of monolithic principles, it is more pertinent than ever to propose outlines that reinstate the fluidity of individual and national identities and the increasingly porous quality of 'national' and 'foreign' discourses, and that create intercultural, liminal and 'in-between' spaces where playwrights, actors and directors propose different (and equally valuable) readings of canonical plays, or offer local reinterpretations, rewritings and new creations based on 'foreign' dramatic discourses. In this manner, a more encompassing notion of national identity, as expressed through dramatic works, will be formed and carefully articulated.

2. Stages of cultural reception and reinterpretation

Although the stages are presented below in a linear fashion, in a socio-historic context they do not always precede or succeed each other in an orderly fashion, or even all happen in every reception

of a specific dramatic discourse. In Chekhov's case, for example, there were intermediate periods where two developments superimposed or developed in parallel, even when dealing with the same audiences. Also, the effects of each stage in the understanding of the Russian author had long term consequences that led to the coexistence of some readings of his works with other later approaches: as the present thesis revealed, for example, at the end of the first decade of the 21st century existed a mixture of conservative, feminist, neo-colonial and postmodern understandings of Chekhovian dramaturgy. The following outline, however, offers a frame hopefully useful for future research focused on the historical development of dramatic discourses, as well as their evolving processes of reception, rejection and recuperation.

The name of the stage will be followed by an abstract description of its main characteristics, in such a way that it can be applied not only to Chekhov but to any other male or female playwright as well, and not only to historical but also to living dramatists. The Russian's author specific example of the UK will be recovered though at the end of all stages to prove their value with historical material previously presented.¹⁵⁶

- 1. Forewarning:** before the dramatic work of an author arrives to a new culture or cultures located in a specific (or 'local') geographic construct (generally understood as a nation), a series of foreign cultural discourses (usually but not necessarily coming directly from the work's place of origin) introduce the author and/or his aesthetics and start building a platform for his future understanding and interpretation. These discourses can be shared and disseminated through written accounts (newspapers, dictionaries, diaries, websites) or oral methods (accounts by travellers, contact with foreign forces), and their arrival might be

¹⁵⁶ Many of the shows indicated in the following pages were already mentioned before; if that's not the case, the information comes from *A selective chronology of British professional productions of Chekhov's plays 1909-1911*, written by Patrick Miles and Stuart Young for *Chekhov on the British Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

caused by: a) an internal development of the target audience that aims to establish contacts with other cultures; b) an imposition by a foreign dominant force due to warfare, colonialism or commerce; c) a mixture of both. At this point, then, there is not a regional interpretation of the author, just a one-way reception of information that is seen with a mixture of curiosity, exoticism and simplification.

Chekhov's British case: The oral and written accounts of the author's dramas by British travellers to Russia (e.g., George Calderon) or in letters by members of the intelligentsia (such as George Bernard Shaw).

2. **Penetration:** before any production of a play takes place –an expensive endeavour that presupposes an audience interested in seeing a show–, a selected intelligentsia (usually located in the urban centres of the geographic construct) read or see a foreign production of the foreign author and, through oral or written exchanges, establish a basic and common interpretation of his plays.¹⁵⁷ The author's first discovery can take place in: a) the original language, as done by linguists, polyglots and/or theatregoers whose interest lies in the original 'foreign' geographic construct due to an aesthetic, political or social affinity; b) a translation, executed by the local figures previously mentioned –who might have spent some time in the place where the work originated– or by foreigners established in the local geographic construct due to immigration. The comprehension of the artist remains at this stage limited and partial; analytical comparisons with local canonical authors and even literary-dramatic works might be produced, but they remain read by a small percentage of

¹⁵⁷ Usually, although not necessarily, the play or plays that are read or seen at this stage are those that have reached more recognition within the 'foreign' geographic construct. This might change as the artist's entire oeuvre becomes more widely known, sometimes leading to different preferences in the original and local geographic constructs.

the population and are generally seen only as attempts to understand or imitate a discourse that still has little connection to the geographic construct's traditions.

Chekhov's British case: George Calderon's version of *The Seagull* (1909) and Constance Garnett's translations of the last four full-length plays (1923). The latter was particularly successful with the country's intelligentsia, and later on served as the standard version for many professional productions.

3. **Initial performances:** either after a period of 'acclimatisation' in the geographic construct, or in parallel to the recognition of the author through written/dramatic/oral methods, an actor or director leads a production or productions of a play that generally have an unprofessional or semi-professional status and receive a short run in a small venue at an urban centre. Sometimes a full play is staged; in others extracts (acts or scenes) or one-act plays –if available– are presented. The results are not immediately recognised by the general public or have a resounding economic success¹⁵⁸; local critics and a bigger group of theatre enthusiasts, however, access the author and discover one dramatic reading of his aesthetic style. Through their word of mouth impressions or positive or negative reviews – published in newspapers, blogs, or specialised websites– the foreign author penetrates into a wider cultural group of the local geographic construct; supported by the specific interpretation of a director, translator and/or actors, his original 'foreignness' starts to merge with local socio-aesthetic discourses, although without establishing a closer bond with them yet beyond a certain degree of respect and recognition.

¹⁵⁸ If they are successful it can be argued that the production mixed both the third and fourth stages of the present outline.

These processes can be repeated many times in different areas of the geographic construct, and not necessarily lead to the next stage of reception. If some of the conditions suggested below do not take place, the author's local position might eventually evolve into a public recognition that does not resonate on a national identity level. When this is the case, the creator's plays can be staged with relative regularity, and even reach important economic successes; the artist's aesthetics, though, remain essentially foreign, respected but not influential in the development of local dramatic discourses.

Chekhov's British case: Princess Bariatinska's performance of *The Bear* (1911) or Vera Donnet's *The Seagull* (1919).

4. **Breaking point:** a specific production (or a series of productions presented in a short span of time) becomes very successful, from an economic, aesthetic, dramatic and/or political perspective. In order for this to happen the presence of some of the following elements is necessary: a) a social and political environment where, due to social transformations –such as the end of a war, dynasty or government, or the empowerment of a new generation– previously regarded aesthetic trends are displaced in favour of renewed perspectives; b) a cultural penetration and recognition of the author, which leads to an economic interest by theatrical producers to stage bigger professional productions aimed at wider and more popular audiences; c) a director who, thanks to personal and/or political reasons, is relatively well-informed about the author's background, can recognise the zeitgeist of the culture that surrounds him, and has the commercial instinct to know which elements of the author are more appropriate for the needs of his target audience (leading to possible rewritings, mistranslations, shortenings or simplifications of the original dramas); and d) an important critical reception, which can be positive or negative but always possesses a

certain impact, leading to a wider recognition of the production both in the area where it is presented and in other regions of the geographic construct.

The reaching of this milestone represents the first moment of successful assimilation of the author, where a specific (and necessarily reductive) reading of his works is seen by audiences and critics alike as a representation of a determinate social class, period or national identity issue. Due to this high degree of specificity, though, where the play responds importantly although limitedly to contemporary circumstances, it cannot be claimed that this success is the final step of the reception process: as the following stages demonstrate, geographical expansion and cultural transformations are important elements an aesthetic discourse must confront before reaching more interpretative variety within a geographic construct.

Chekhov's British case: Theodor Komisarjevsky's production of *Three Sisters* (1926), which imposed the reading of the Russian author as a nostalgic reminder of the lost glories of the aristocracy and the 'golden days' of the Victorian era.

5. **Expansion:** after the original success, the author's oeuvre expands throughout the geographic construct, reaching smaller urban areas, semi-rural zones or rural communities with important cultural centres, following different patterns that depend on the socio-historic particularities of each region. First, the process usually unfolds at a relatively fast pace, which is the result of the fame achieved by the breaking point production, the desire of new audiences to catch up with it, and/or the economic interest by regional producers to present a production that can give them considerable profits due to its previous recognition; eventually, the rhythm of expansion decreases and the aesthetic discourse faces a myriad of regional and/or local challenges where its usefulness in the creation of

new identities is tested. More localised receptions, which follow the processes defined in stages three and four of this outline, are replicated; cities, towns and/or villages confront the work of art –whose interpretation is still mediated by the reading proposed by the breaking point– and collectively ‘decide’ (through the results of a local production, for example) if it fits or not their own cultural environment. The results can be: a) total rejection, which indicates that the foreign work is seen as an entirely alien and perhaps even invasive force; b) mixed reception, that not necessarily embraces the new discourse but leaves the door open for future re-interpretations; and c) a positive response, which might lead to the embrace and local transformation of the drama.

The results of this expansion are crucial due to the way they ultimately ensure the sustainability of the author’s interpretation within a geographic construct: the dramatic discourse will be otherwise constrained to some regions, where it might preserve a degree of recognition, but it will not be known well enough to serve as a cultural bridge among communities. Also, depending if the cultural centres of the target area accept or not the author’s dramas (and start creating their own readings of them), the foreign discourse might either be comprehensively re-interpreted or regress to a more contained state after the initial peak of interest.

This stage never completely ends: if the geographic construct’s internal notion of identity expands to include new ethnic backgrounds or cultures, or productions are made in territories whose discourses had previously been dismissed or underestimated, this stage and its subsequent developments are repeated, empowering or weakening the local reception of the artist.

Chekhov's British case: W.G. Fay's 1927 staging of *Uncle Vanya* for the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, one of the first productions of a full-length Chekhov to play outside of London since Calderon's times.

6. **Stabilisation:** once the dramatic author and his aesthetic discourse successfully achieve a prolonged permanence in a specific urban and/or regional space, and parallel to its expansion in other regions, it reaches a first period of stability, where its influence is recognised not only in the revivals of the same productions that led to its original embrace, but also in the staging of new translations of the plays or the presentation of previously unexplored dramatic creations by the same author.¹⁵⁹ Also, new plays by local authors start to be written, sometimes openly referencing and restructuring the characters or plots of the author, or at least using some of his main themes or aesthetic devices as inspirations for their own dramatic developments. The result is the 'adoption' of the foreign aesthetic discourse, seemingly transformed by a process of assimilation into a valuable asset that allows the discussion of local and nationwide issues.

One caveat remains: due to the pervading influence of the original breaking point, even at this stage of assimilation the author's dramas are read in specific regions through restricted interpretative parameters. This establishes a reading of the author through which local audiences and reviewers within the geographic construct interpret and embrace him –that 'right way' of doing certain plays which in reality is an inherited cultural capital that serves

¹⁵⁹ This process initially develops in parallel to the expansion stage, leading to a hybrid scenario within the geographic construct where some regions stage the author on a regular basis (therefore following the trends of the stabilisation stage), while others are still receiving and adapting the dramatic discourse. After this intermediate development, once (and if) the dramatic discourse is accepted by many localised forces, a general stabilisation can be achieved, allowing a more encompassing (and varied) influence of the author within the geographic construct.

as an interpretative guide.¹⁶⁰ That specific prism, though, also tends to celebrate on stage a unique cultural discourse that by its nature is essentially limited: as a result, the aesthetic exploration of the subtleties and social issues potentially presented in the dramas is partly undermined. Also, the capacity of the plays to indirectly explore the cultural diversity of a specific society is restricted, leading them in some occasions to become preservers of limited and –in the worst cases– oppressive cultural discourses. If this is the case, it can be argued that although there exists already a cultural assimilation, its usage by specific socio-political classes restricts its possibilities to build bridges among and within societies.

Chekhov's British case: regarding shows that preserved the interpretation of the 'breaking point' production (Komisarjevsky's 1926 *Three Sisters*), particularly representative are Theodor Komisarjevsky's own version of *The Seagull* (1936), with Peggy Ashcroft and John Gielgud; John Burrell's *Uncle Vanya* (1945), with Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson; and Laurence Olivier's *Uncle Vanya* (1961), with Joan Plowright and Michael Redgrave, presented as part of the Chichester Festival Theatre.

Regarding authors influenced by Chekhov's assimilated discourse, (we can recall) Terence Rattigan's case, who openly recognised the Russian playwright's influence and used it in plays such as *After the Dance* (1939), *The Browning Version* (1948) and *The Deep Blue Sea* (1952).

7. **Re-evaluation:** after a certain period of time, which might span between a few years to a couple of decades depending on the speed of expansion and/or stabilisation within the

¹⁶⁰ It is not uncommon to see at this stage how the assimilated author is so accepted by audiences and reviewers that some can claim ownership of the artist's work over other territories: as seen before, some Chekhovian British productions have been considered by critics as superior to the Russian ones, based on a 'greater understanding' of the author's intentions.

geographic construct, new audiences and artists reject what they regard as 'traditional' readings of the dramatic discourse and propose instead renewed visions that implicitly reveal cultural transformations and intercultural dialogues. This can happen due to: a) internal historical transformations, connected to cultural-ethnic evolutions, the empowerment of previously oppressed discourses and/or the disappearance of a previous political system; b) the influence of discourses external to the geographic construct, which offers new perspectives and presents to local audiences previously ignored or dismissed understandings of political and cultural identity; and c) the arrival of a younger generation of creators that are keen to explore different dramatic perspectives.

As a result of the previous elements, the author (or, more precisely, his or her reading within a geographic construct) faces a criticism that attempts to expose both the limitations of the initial assimilation, and how the simplifications created by the breaking point prevented the consideration of other possible understandings. Some possible outcomes of this critique can be: a) a revalidation of the initial interpretation; b) a relative tolerance for the initial interpretation, which masks a growing indifference towards the author's dramas; c) a strong and general backlash where the author is openly dismissed; or d) a critical reconsideration of the creator's position within the local dramatic community. The second and third possibilities, if maintained throughout a long period of time, can lead to a regression of the author's consideration to either a respected but essentially alien figure or –in the most extreme cases– a harmful 'foreign' influence that must be completely rejected. Meanwhile, the fourth scenario can conclude in a general (although by no means absolute) consensus that the author does not serve to address all the necessities of the new generations or societies in construction; if that is the case, his position within the geographic construct does not necessarily fade away, but remains fixed in the already established interpretation.

The importance of the breaking point, then, must be emphasised again: even if the dramatic discourse does not evolve any further from this point, its original impact can lead to the long-term preservation of productions that follow its reading and that satisfy the expectations of those audience members who agree with it. This view of the author cannot therefore be considered as necessarily bad or negative; its relevance as an addresser of new cultural or national identities, however, remains limited at best.

Chekhov's British case: to underline the importance of socio-aesthetic transformations in the development of this stage, two elements that influenced the confrontation with a Komisarjevsky-based reading of Chekhov's dramas must be mentioned. One, Britain's transitional period experienced at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, connected to the collapse of the colonial Empire, the arrival of new ethnic forces, and the aesthetic-political empowerment of previously underestimated social groups (such as the working class, women, etc.). Two, the presentation of foreign productions that expressed readings of the author previously unexplored within the country, such as the 1958 MAT season in London, which included *The Cherry Orchard*, *Uncle Vanya* and *Three Sisters*, and Ottomar Krejča and Theatre Behind the Gate's 1969 version of *Three Sisters*.

Some early productions that offered local reinterpretations of the Russian author are Jonathan Miller's *The Seagull* (1968) and Trevor Griffiths and Richard Eyre's *The Cherry Orchard* (1977).

8. **Reconfiguration:** if the re-evaluation of the author—expressed in the first less 'traditionalist' productions—does not lead to his or her rejection but to a recognition of previously unexplored meanings, the dramatic discourse receives a boost within the geographic construct that leads to productions with fresh socio-aesthetic perspectives and new views

on gender, social organisation and national identity (among other themes). The result is that the original plays and their adaptations, without completely abandoning interpretations influenced by the breaking point, also successfully escape the boundaries fixed by it, becoming instead protean and polyvalent forces that can be interpreted in different and even opposite manners by traditional, progressive, classical, avant-garde, urban and regional companies. Through them, artists of all backgrounds expose their own artistic idiosyncrasies, express through the emphasis on specific dialogues or characters their opinions on determinate elements of their culture, and even propose solutions to some of the most pressing issues of their time. Also, the artist's style inspires new dramatic works by young and upcoming playwrights, whose style can be as varied as the discourse itself; beyond their individual degrees of economic and/or artistic success, they all capitalise on the original dramas while reinforcing their position as platforms to express the cultural variety of the geographic construct.

As in the previous stage, foreign productions of the author coexist with local interpretations, continuously exposing the geographic construct to many multifaceted readings of his or her plays. Even if this is not directly the case, and the revalorisation is pushed mostly by internal forces, the influence of 'international' discourses of the artist cannot be undermined: whether if it happens through the presentation of shows in specialised theatres and festivals, or through audio-visual recordings found on the Internet or presented in cinemas, the result is that local audiences, critics and artists are constantly reminded of the variety of interpretative options available when dealing with what are now regarded as 'canonical' works. By doing so, the aesthetic discourse acquires a hybrid and liminal nature: rather than being an exclusively alien force, as it happened at the beginning of the process, or an assimilated author who can only accept limited interpretations, as developed after the

breaking point stage, the artist also becomes a rewardingly indefinite figure, who in his or her dual position as a foreign force and a locally recognised figure has a unique skill to build cultural connections and allow a multiplicity of intercultural discourses. It is up to other artists to explore this diversity of interpretative possibilities.

The processes of re-evaluation and reconfiguration, it must be said, are closely tied; in fact, if the discourse wants to preserve its connection with new aesthetic styles and upcoming notions of identity, it is indispensable that it remains open to a constant critical reconsideration by the new generations throughout the years.

Chekhov's British case: many productions presented after the 1980s all around the UK followed this reconfiguration preference, coexisting with those that preserved a more traditional reading based on the breaking point production. Some examples are Mike Alfreds' 1986 production of *The Cherry Orchard*, Mustapha Matura's 1988 rewriting of *Three Sisters* as *Trinidad Sisters*, or –moving into the 21st century– Cheek by Jowl's 2007 version of *Three Sisters* and the productions analysed in the third and fourth chapters of this work.

9. **Exportation:** once it has been reconstructed and reinterpreted by local authors, the dramatic discourse is taken out more frequently from its adopted geographic construct and presented in other foreign geographic constructs (which can include the discourse's original place of creation), where it can influence the author's interpretation and restart the reception process mentioned above. This usually happens through the presentation of a particular production in: a) an international tour; b) a theatre festival; c) a recording, presented in other parts of the world through the internet or in selected cinemas.¹⁶¹ If the

¹⁶¹ Such is the case, in the UK, of National Theatre Live, an initiative started in 2009 that presents selected productions of the company in cinemas within the country and around the world. Even authors who were not

conditions on the new geographic construct are the right ones –following some of the parameters presented at the beginning of this outline, which include economic, politic and artistic reasons–, the discourse can influence there new processes of reception and reconfiguration at different speeds and time periods.

Occasionally, some productions appeared at this stage can be supported by international co-productions, in which case some might attempt to produce a staging with an even more overt intercultural edge, using –for example– actors from different countries or proposing a reading of a play that overtly goes beyond the ‘boundaries’ of national identity. If this is not the case, and the whole endeavour is controlled by a director that prefers to explore the author according to a ‘local’ reading of his work, the show will still be representative of the different approaches that he has reached within the geographic construct after years of assimilations, re-evaluations and reinterpretations.

Also, although this stage was left until the end of the outline, mainly due to the fact that the possibilities of taking abroad a production are greater after the dramatic discourse has reached a local maturity and a certain degree of reinterpretation, it must be signalled that the foreign presentation of a particular production can take place at any point after the breaking point. If that is the case, though, the possibilities that the production will transmit a more varied and diverse reading of the author are considerably reduced.

Chekhov’s British case: Sam Mendes’ production of *The Cherry Orchard*, presented in Singapore, New Zealand and Spain (among other places) as part of an international tour.

originally from the country can be seen for the first time by some audiences around the world through the specific interpretations created by British directors, translators and actors.

This outline does not convey all the specificities of each case regarding a determined author; it should be considered as a tentative model which invites complication and contest, primarily intended for the understanding of how dramatic discourses (rather than operatic, literary or poetic forces) can be received within a geographic construct. Due to the contemporary evolution of theatre, where written plays coexist with performative or improvisational events, it must be mentioned again that not every case goes through all the stages presented above; after all, every process of reception and reinterpretation is an endeavour filled with advances and drawbacks that, in its overlappings and parallel developments, is more complex than a direct acceptance or rejection of an author's play or plays. As it will be explored below, it is in a perpetually transformative space, where the author appeals to local audiences and artists while at the same time retaining a malleable quality that avoids a total ownership or an 'final' interpretation –that is, in a case where he has reached the last stages of this outline–, that the dramatic discourse allows not only a myriad of aesthetic approaches, but also a deeper understanding of a society within any given geographic construct.

This constant (and desirable) fluidity also suggests a question: are there certain elements that make a discourse more prone to the development (and preservation) of long-term reception and reinterpretation processes? Once more, the analysis of Chekhov's case –which, because of its historical durability and intricate evolution, is a good representative of these developments– reveals two important conditions: first, an 'internal' quality of the dramatic discourse, and second, a series of external socio-political factors. Both of them will be analysed in the following paragraphs.

'Internal' factors

The first element can be defined as those elements that in the original, untranslated version, serve as natural 'platforms' for the future developments of cultural reinterpretations. Among them can

be identified, initially, those characteristics proper to many artistic masterpieces: a diversity of characters, strengthened by their psychological and/or allegorical complexity; a plot that possesses a socio-political resonance and a density of conflict that goes beyond its connection with any specific historical period; the creative use of archetypical relationships (parent-child, brother-sister, etc.) to propel the narrative; and a personal writing style that suggests unique atmospheres, creates powerful dramatic episodes and conflicts or pierces with particular intensity essential core issues of human existence. But beyond these generalities, there are also some specific traits that could potentially reinforce the creation of an intercultural discourse, and that are useful to guide further analysis of dramatic discourses. As in the outline's case, all of them do not necessary appear in every 'canonical' playwright, and if they do they can do it either simultaneously, at separate scenes or in different plays. They are:

1. **Inter-cultural dialogue:** the presence –expressed throughout the story– of a moment or moments where two cultures meet or clash, creating either poetic moments or dramatic confrontations. If the result is complex enough, avoiding sweeping generalisations or a demagogic one-sided preference, a powerful framework is created, which can be read through different interpretative angles.

Chekhov's case: even though the majority of Chekhov's dramatic characters are Russians, there is a constant clash in his plays between a rural and an urban culture, and between different cultural upbringings whose different approaches create intercultural conflicts. More specifically, it could be mentioned Charlotta Ivanovna's character in *The Cherry Orchard*, who experiences an intimate sense of displacement due to her upbringing by a German woman and her Slavic surroundings.

2. **Inter-class dialogue:** the play uses the meeting or confrontation between different classes as an important dramatic strategy, presenting all characters as part of a changing and ambiguous social environment where there are not absolute answers. Rather than being decorative or secondary elements, themes like social inequality and economical position are thoroughly explored and discussed.

Chekhov's case: the conflict between Irina, Maria and Olga and Natasha in *Three Sisters*; the richly ambiguous relationship between Lopakhin and Ranevskaya, or the encounter with the Stranger in Act II of *The Cherry Orchard*.

3. **Inter-gender dialogue:** different genders, connected through parentage, friendship and/or amorous relationships, establish contradictory connections filled with power struggles and degrees of control and oppression. Through either dialogues or actions, the characters express various interpretations of the culture that surrounds them, revealing previously undermined or silenced discourses, as well as the limitations of socially-enforced notions of identity, sex and gender.

Chekhov's case: among many examples (Yelena's case in *Uncle Vanya* being already thoroughly analysed), particularly startling is Nina's treatment in *The Seagull*: originally oppressed by her father, seen with a mixture of desire and hate by Treplev, and used and abandoned by Trigorin, she struggles against these forms of male control and, despite the hardships, eventually refuses to play the victim, confronting her life and continuing with her work as a provincial actress.

4. **Inter-race dialogue:** characters from different races (understood mostly as a sociological construct) interact, offering a dramatic base through which cultural differences, aesthetic perspectives and social readings on themes like slavery, subordination or skin-colour based

oppression are explored. Also, if both sides possess emotional density and psychological complexity, the result can be a powerful dramatic mixture.

Chekhov's case: one of *Ivanov's* central characters is the protagonist's wife, Anna, forced to leave behind her Jewish race and culture to convert to Christian Orthodox faith; her death due to tuberculosis, as well as the context of pogroms and anti-Semitism that pervades the social context of the play, adds a tragic layer to the story.

Also, it must be mentioned how some Chekhov's characters have been modified by later adapters to suggest race conflicts. A powerful example is Mustapha Matura's *Trinidad Sisters*, where the Black protagonists were trapped between their dreams of Britain and their reality in World War II Trinidad.

5. **Linguistic diversity:** characters use a diversity of slang, modes of speech and/or languages, which rather than sounding clichéd or just 'colourful' actively promote an act of decipherment from all the 'sides' involved in the story. As a result, many cultural realms are presented, which are particularly useful to express intercultural challenges and communications.

Chekhov's case: Serebyakov's professorial tone, which clashes with the desperate inflections of Voynitsky's (Uncle Vanya's) speech in *Uncle Vanya*; or the sarcastic-popular qualities of manservant Yasha's dialogues, which oppose the intellectual flourishes of Lopakhin's monologues in *The Cherry Orchard*.

As mentioned, these elements do not have to appear all together in a specific work of art, especially when considering other external factors (mentioned below) that can also influence a reception and reinterpretation process. Also, they do not necessarily characterise all the canonical works that are

reinterpreted by different 'foreign' forces –sometimes their intercultural values emerge in the translations created by certain figures with specific agendas. However, it is undeniable that if they are present the original work will have a richer tapestry of cultural connotations to be potentially used by translators, playwrights and actors.

'External' factors

Alongside the inherent qualities of the discourse, exemplified above by Chekhov's plays, any process of dramatic reception also requires some factors connected to the historical development of the culture where it unfolds. After all, a work of art's ultimate influence in any given space cannot be understood without the socio-political issues that surround its interpretations throughout many historical periods; and dramas, with their unfinished quality, collective nature and connection with audiences, depend even more on the society where they are presented. Therefore, to initiate any dramatic discourse's reception some (not necessarily all) of the following elements should be present in the 'local' geographical construct:

- 1. A culturally open and/or transitional historical period:** in order for the 'external' discourse to access the target culture, there must be a physical and ideological 'openness' to allow its original introduction. This can happen at a moment where the territory is transitioning between two cultural-historical eras, or at a critical time where national identity is redefining itself and there is a necessity for new discourses; also, it can take place in a stable society whose cultural borders are open, allowing the constant arrival and reception of new discourses, as well as the creation of local interpretations.

It is important to note here that if the discourse is to remain powerful, the target culture must be ready to embrace it beyond this specific historical period and despite artistic or socio-political evolutions; any reception and reinterpretation process can be disrupted by

disparate elements such as a change of dramatic preferences, the arrival of extreme nationalisms or the strengthening of 'local' cultures over 'international' forces.

Chekhov's British case: as seen before, Chekhov properly accessed the UK during the 1920s, when the country was starting to question its imperial past, while at the same time remembering its allure at a time of post-World War I uncertainties.

2. **A receptive and/or economically resourceful intelligentsia:** before reaching its general audiences, the aesthetic discourse is usually recognised by a selected group who are more aware of it due to their knowledge of the foreign culture, language and/or traditions. If they decide not to embrace this new voice, or to respect it but without really pushing forward towards its local adoption through the use of their own economic resources or those of producers connected to them, the result can be a (permanent or temporary) rejection of the discourse within the new geographic construct. Even with the contemporary existence of social media and other more social methods to propagate a work, without this support the theatrical staging of a new play (which requires a communal effort and an economic investment) might at least be considerably delayed.

A general receptivity is essential: the intelligentsia must be open to new cultural forces, and be eager to share and adapt them to the local environment. Once more, an overtly nationalistic discourse –where only 'national' authors are celebrated– might limit or prevent the achievements of the authors.

Chekhov's British case: George Calderon, first translator and director of Chekhov in the country; George Bernard Shaw, whose interest in the Russian author led to his increased recognition within theatrical circles; or Princess Baratinska, director of some of the first semi-professional productions of the author in London.

3. Local generations of interpreters, actors and/or playwrights interested in the dramatic

discourse: the dramatic discourse cannot be accepted only with the support of a group of followers, who in any case are not always professional artists. If it wants to expand and reach general audiences, it requires the support of creators who can recognise its potential and successfully adapt it to the local stage. This comprehension might come from the fact that these artists themselves are foreigners (coming, for example, from the same region where the dramatic discourse originated), or because they have an interest in the original culture due to previous personal experiences.

In order to successfully penetrate audiences, creating not just a 'good' show but also one that achieves general support, it is also indispensable that the director/interpreter has an understanding of the target culture, recognising which elements of the dramatic discourse are particularly important for the local identity, and interpreting the play accordingly (even if this leads to a distortion of some of the original characters, texts and dialogues). If s/he is successful, the play or plays might become widely 'adopted' by audiences; in the best case scenario, this might even lead to the transformation of the show into a statement that captures the zeitgeist of a specific period.

Finally, once this first discovery is left behind, it is necessary that other local artists continue the tradition of innovation and creativity, proposing readings of the dramatic discourse that fit the purposes of new generations and historical periods. If the response of these new voices is completely negative or passive, the dramatic discourse might be severely weakened or even disappear completely.

Chekhov's British case: Theodor Komisarjevsky's 1920s and 1930s productions; Jonathan Miller's version of *The Seagull* (1968).

4. **A critical audience:** connected with the previous point, it is not enough to have some artists proposing a reading of the dramatic discourse and/or play; it is also indispensable to have an audience predisposed to accept and embrace them after the show or shows have taken place. A theatrical culture, an openness to new theatrical discourses and (at least) a moderate acquisitive power, in order to be able to attend the shows, is then required; and, once the play receives considerable recognition, a constant interest on their part in the different proposed interpretations of the dramatic material is essential. Otherwise –like in those cases when the dramatic discourse is imposed as a colonial or political tool to a subjugated geographic construct– the result can be a series of dramatic productions that follow a reductive interpretation of the author, risking a later impoverishment of the discourse or even a complete rejection by audiences.
5. **A period (or periods) of socio-economic stability:** even if its original arrival took place at a period of historical unrest, in order for the discourse to maintain its power and recognition it must eventually expand and evolve through a period of relative economic stability.¹⁶² This allows, first, a stream of productions that ensure the permanence of the theatrical discourse within the realm of the stage; second, the expansion of the discourse to other areas within the same geographical construct (smaller cities, countryside, etc.); and third, the eventual existence of reinterpretations of the discourse that go beyond the interests of the first generation of directors and actors, and that venture into ‘non-conventional’ or avant-garde understandings.

¹⁶² Depending on the scale of time, and how long does it take the dramatic discourse to settle and expand around the country, this period can run parallel to its adoption or take place afterwards.

If the economic situation of the geographic construct is dire there is still the chance that the author will be reinterpreted, but it will be harder for it to be recognised by audiences.

Chekhov's British case: two peaks of British Chekhovian interpretation took place during periods of relative socio-economic stability: one during the early 1920s, before the Great Depression affected the country in the 1930s; the other in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when younger generations saw the results of the welfare system created in the 1950s.

6. **A reinterpretation of the discourse beyond translations and adaptations:** if the dramatic discourse is to become fully hybrid and liminal, it is not enough for it to be represented with more or less fidelity in a myriad of translations used in different productions, or even in local adaptations of the original works. Instead, it should become an inspiration for local playwrights, performance artists or directors, who can use specific characters, plot devices or atmospheres of the original author to express their personal (and local) socio-aesthetic enquiries. If the results avoid a derivative quality and explore relevant issues of the time such as the development of national identity or the processes of intercultural exchange, the impact of the theatrical discourse beyond the original plays will be proved, indicating its ultimate flexibility and usefulness for the local geographic construct.

Chekhov's British case: Dan Rebellato's *Chekhov in Hell*; dreamthinspeak's *Before I sleep*.

As suggested, none of these factors are compulsory; specific cases might have only some of these elements added along with other different (and surprising) characteristics. However, when put all together they reveal how reception and reinterpretation processes cannot be defined by a singular turning point; instead, they create a changing progression where transformation and incompleteness play an essential role, and that can lead to a position where –as indicated at the end of this conclusion– a liminal view of intercultural national identity can be explored.

Before reaching this point, however, it is important –for the sake of testing if it resists a different exploration and application– if the outlines presented above can be applied after all to an author different from Chekhov on another geographic construct. After all, the processes of dramatic adaptation and reinterpretation are by no means unique to the UK or any of its regions; instead, they happen all around the world every time a local dramatic discourse is exported, translated, promoted and/or marketed, and they indistinctly affect every type of theatrical activity. Due to this, the following pages will temporarily leave aside the Russian author and explore a different case: that of Japan and the plays of William Shakespeare. At first sight, this particular example might look distant from the rest of the thesis, and to an extent it is: in the end, the ultimate goal of the outline is to use it in any cultural-geographic background, and this separation serves to show its applicability more widely. However, there are four specific reasons that can be pointed out here to underline this example’s utility: first, the academic documentation already available, which not only provides comprehensive information without the need of original research (which would have been out of place in this conclusion), but also allows a thorough consideration of the author’s reception during an extended period of time. Second, the situation of Japan and the UK as islands and former empires with a rich theatrical tradition, which indicates how both territories were exposed at certain historical periods to many dramatic voices and discourses, becoming fertile grounds for processes of cultural reception and reinterpretation. Third, the contemporary acceptance of the author, proved (as seen below) by the evolution of its original ‘foreign’ quality into a later widespread local recognition expressed in a variety of stagings all around the country. And fourth, the considerable geographic distance and cultural differentiation between the two countries, which permits an application of the outline to a context that was not directly influenced by British cultural colonisation (an element that could simplistically be used as the ‘real’ cause of all of Shakespeare’s aesthetic

reception processes) and that did not share some links that could be used to undermine the reception process as one merely based in inherited historical connections.¹⁶³

After this application of the outline, which will highlight historic events and specific productions commonly recognised by researchers as the most important ones in the history of Shakespearian performances in Japan¹⁶⁴, this text will return to a general perspective and will try to capture how the final stages of theatre reception and reinterpretation can serve to explore intercultural connections and reveal new notions of national identity.

3. Shakespeare and Japan: an ‘international’ reception case

William Shakespeare’s reception and reinterpretation into Japanese culture must be connected, as it happened to Chekhov’s case in the UK, with the historic developments of the country. The *forewarning* stage, where the English author started to be known, began with the relaxation of the tight border controls at the end of the Edo period, in the middle of the nineteenth century: as Toyoda Minoru writes in *Shakespeare in Japan: an historical survey* (1940: 80), “in 1808 the coming of the English ship *Phacton* created a need for knowledge of English”. This was a pragmatic decision which reflected the renewed commercial contacts with the UK, severely limited until that point by the Dutch commercial monopoly in the area; a monopoly that, in fact, led to the first appearance of Shakespeare in Japan in 1841, when Shibukawa Rokuzo translated “the Dutch version of Lindley

¹⁶³ This is the reason why an important case such as Germany, where Shakespeare has received a considerable degree of recognition since the early 19th century, will not be considered here: it would have certainly allowed an easier exploration of the processes of interpretation and reinterpretation of the Bard’s plays, but at the same time would have exposed the outline to a critique based on its Eurocentric focus, the linguistic connections between the languages or simply the shared European bond between both territories.

¹⁶⁴ There will not be a detailed reconsideration of past performances just as in the historical contextualisation of this work, or extensive analysis such as the ones presented in the past four chapters: only those elements that will help towards the demonstration of the general outline’s utility will be used.

Murray's *English Grammar*", on which the writer's name was "transliterated into *katakana* to represent the pronunciation (*Sha-kesu-pi-ru*)" (Minoru, 1940: 81). Even though no plays of the author were presented in the island until then, his name (and, most importantly, his aesthetic qualities) entered Japan through an intercultural process where he was recognised as an internationally renowned force by a 'foreign' country like the Netherlands; at the same time, his appearance in that territory served as a propagandistic weapon that established the credentials of the (in the area) relatively unknown British Empire at a time of important transformations. The most important one, as Yoshiko Kawachi (2005: 64) explains in *Shakespeare and Japan*, took place 26 years later: "the Meiji Restoration of 1868 (...) which promoted Japan's rapid modernisation (...) [and led] people to attain the Western level of culture as soon as possible". Some years before this, most specifically between 1853 and 1854, "Matthew Calbraith Perry had come to Uraga (...) [and] pressed Japan to open herself to foreign trade and diplomatic relations" (Kawachi, 2005: 63-64), marking a precedent for the international relationship between the two territories; but it was only until the epoch-making event mentioned above that British discourses –whether cultural, political or economic– started to influence Japanese citizens.

The local interest for European education, as well as the curiosity for Shakespeare as a symbol of the 'cultural prowess' of the UK, led to the **penetration** phase: limited at this point to the urban areas and a selected intelligentsia, and before any staging took place, the fascination for the Bard's plays was confined to the publishing and written world. Between the late 1860s and the early 1880s, magazines and newspapers published either translations of selected soliloquies and scenes, or adaptations of his most representative plays: some examples are Charles Wirgman's 1874 translation of "the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy in broken Japanese for the *Japan Punch*", or the 1877 "adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*" untitled *Kyoniku no Kisho* or 'A Strange Litigation about the Chest' (Kawachi, 2005: 64). The literal translation of the very last title is revealing in the

way it indicates how certain elements of the plot –no matter how well explained they were by the characters themselves– still seemed foreign for cultured local audiences; the Bard’s dramatic style remained at odds with that of the local dramatic canon, exemplified at the time by kabuki (more about this later). At this point, then, he was seen more as an obscure literary author than a dramatist, which might explain why the whole endeavour was presented as “an adaptation of the novel by Shakespeare of England”, why it was entirely written in a narrative prose and why it had detailed descriptions that explained every symbolism of the plot (Minoru, 1940: 84). Similarly to Chekhov’s position in early 20th century Britain (where the Russian’s achievements were discussed in letters and articles by intellectual figures like George Bernard Shaw), the Bard’s work was an exotic artefact that, if anything, served to emphasise the desire by the members of the minority ‘cultured’ elites to open up to ‘new’ forms of literature after a prolonged period of isolation.

It was not until 1885 that a Shakespeare play was finally premiered on the stage. That year, another adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*, written by Bunkai Udagawa and untitled “*Sakuradoki Zeni no Yononaka* (‘The Season of Cherry-Blossoms; the World of Money’)” was dramatized by Hikoza Katsu and staged by “the Nakamura Sojuro Kabuki Company” (Kawachi, 2005: 64). This production, which achieved general success, is revealing due to the way it responded to audiences’ expectations, capturing the local zeitgeist in the same way that Komisarjevsky’s Chekhovian productions apprehended that of 1920s London. Two stages of reception, those of **initial performances** and the **breaking point**, overlapped on this occasion, perhaps due to two reasons: one, the fact that in Japan the author had by this point a long history of written adaptations that prepared audiences for its almost immediate reception on the stage; two, the ability of the creators of this particular production to invest it with some elements that made it immediately recognisable and identifiable to local audiences. The first one was the transplantation of the plot from Venice to Japan, more specifically “the Osaka of the Tokugawa period” (Kawachi, 2005: 64): by moving the story to a city

that was well known as the home of a strong merchant class, and by taking spectators back to a period of corruption and cultural stagnation, Udagawa and Katsu used the play as a politically charged artefact that commented on the inequalities of previous historical periods and the hopes for a more progressive society. Within this context, the final trial scene acquired a powerful connotation, not only because it reflected the local interest in “European law as a model for modernizing the legal system” or highlighted how “economics and (...) finance were most important for Japan’s modernization” (Kawachi, 2005: 64-65), but also because through it a past of injustice and excess was symbolically put on trial and rejected in favour of a then promising future.¹⁶⁵

Unsurprisingly, this particular scene was repeatedly (and successfully) performed afterwards as an independent piece: a decision that shows how the author’s plays were now combined with the local theatrical tradition of kabuki. This style is characterised by its incorporation of “innovative musical, choreographical and artistic styles that have often been considered strange and shocking” (Law, 2013: 269), such as the use of elaborate costumes, colourful makeups, and complex technical devices; due to the episodic nature of its plots, and its preference for spectacle and dramatic suggestion, it’s common to see a collection of independent episodes from different plays on the same evening, just as happened to *The Merchant of Venice*. Beyond this, this selection reveals too how the symbolic meanings of the play were successfully re-codified to fit local interests and expectations, creating a bridge between the original’s thematic interests and its newly found spectators. As Tetsuo Kishi and Graham Bradshaw develop in *Shakespeare in Japan* (2005: 3), “the Japanese were politically and socially far closer to feudalism than contemporary British or American readers and audiences (...); the moment of Shakespeare’s arrival [to Japan] was culturally timely

¹⁶⁵ To emphasise this idea, Tamaei –the name given to Portia throughout this adaptation– was “described as an independent and highly educated woman” (Kawachi, 2005: 65). This presented to local feminine audiences a different role model to follow that went beyond old codes of behaviour.

because Shakespearean drama so often projects the no less momentous Western conflict between the old and the new, or between late medieval and emergent Renaissance values” – a similar transformation that the one endured at the second half of the 19th century by Japanese culture. Just like Komisarjevsky’s *Three Sisters*, Udagawa and Katsu’s rewriting of *The Merchant of Venice* proposed a new understanding of nation where the past filled an important role, and produced a landmark creation that served, first, as the milestone for the general acceptance of the English playwright in the country, and second, as an interpretative base that other dramatists would follow in subsequent years.

Throughout the next twenty years, in fact, Shakespeare reached both an **expansion** and a **stabilisation** stage, becoming more well known around the country while maintaining its assimilated recognition in the places where the first performances of his work took place. An example of these developments can be found in Ii Yoho’s *Julius Cesar*, produced in 1901: the plot, concerned with the machinations and hostilities of power, was on this occasion not transplanted to Japan but kept the original’s locations; despite this closer textual relation, its staging participated in the *shimpa* school of drama, which was “a modern version of the Japanese Kabuki drama that reflected Western influence, even allowing women to appear on stage” (Law, 2013: 463). Yoho’s production was then the result of the attempts to preserve local traditions while adding some external aesthetic influences, reflecting the transitional evolution of the country. Indeed, from the time of Udagawa and Katsu’s *Merchant of Venice* “political parties in Japan discussed whether or not Japan should have a cabinet and the Diet”; a desire to combine a monarchical past with a parliamentary future that eventually led to the appearance of Japan’s First Cabinet in 1885 and the “Great Japan’s Imperial Constitution” in 1889 (Kawachi, 2005: 66). Far from solving all political uncertainties, though, these organisms created new political tensions, reaching in 1901 a particularly critical moment when “Toru Hoshi, the leader of a political party and Speaker of the House of

Representatives, was assassinated in June” (Kawachi, 2005: 66). *Julius Cesar*, presented in the aftermath of this crime, served therefore as a commentary on the complexities of power and the general difficulties of Japanese culture to deal with its new political structures: the then 300 years old creation became a ‘state of the nation’ play, establishing a dramatic space for audiences’ confrontations with their own national contradictions.

This questioning of national values led to the appearance of another generation of artists who believed “that traditional Japanese theatre had little relevance to the contemporary Japanese staging”, and who “emphasised the social significance of drama, and tried to elevate the status of theatre and theatre artists” (Kishi & Bradshaw, 2005: 21). In order to do that they created what was known as the *shingeki* (‘new’) school of drama, which openly embraced European theatrical techniques and used them to capture the changes of the turn-of-the-century society where its inception took place. The expectation was not to blindly imitate foreign aesthetic styles but to provide stylistic innovations that could be useful for an analysis of cultural, economic and political issues; a **re-evaluation** stage started where the utility of many aesthetic discourses was put into consideration, in order to see if they fitted with the new necessities of the region. In Shakespeare’s case, the result of this first confrontation was positive: according to Tsubouchi Soyo, one of the main reformers of this generation, the “Western Romantic drama” that he represented was for them a tool to teach the preponderance of thematic content over performative surface, or in other words, how “actors should serve drama as a literary art, not vice versa” (quoted by Kishi & Bradshaw, 2005: 20-21).¹⁶⁶ Just like the British Chekhovian productions that flourished after the early 1960s, these artists proposed a new view of national identity; they represented the growing industrialisation and cosmopolitanism of the country’s urban centres.

¹⁶⁶ Simultaneously, Ibsen was recognised as the main figure of Western ‘realist’ values; his plays presented a series of moral and gender conundrums that also resonated with local audiences.

Soyo's *Hamlet*, premiered in November 1907 by his company Bungei Kyuokai (Literary Society), was an early example of these attempts. The play's choice was not random: the character of Hamlet, with his rebellious youthfulness and intensity, represented "the modernisation of the Japanese drama, novel and poetry" (Kawachi, 2005: 68). Like the young Dane, the director and his actors considered themselves 'fighters' against the last remains of an old-fashioned hierarchical system; the conflict between the old and the new acquired political connotations that paralleled those present when Shakespeare wrote the play. It can be remembered here the assertion that at the time the Japanese were closer to feudalism than British audiences; for the younger artistic generations, struggling between a craving for change and the power of the national-cultural past, Elsinore, its characters and its social world became a recognisable scenario where their own interests were projected and discussed. Such was its impact, in fact, that this universe was eventually used by other authors in creations not connected to the stage: examples are the novelisations *Claudius' Diary* by Naoya Shiga (1919), which "described the inner life of Claudius caught in a dilemma between his love for Gertrude and his distrust of Hamlet" (Kawachi, 2005: 68), and Osamu Dazai's *New Hamlet*, which presented the titular character as "a nihilistic playboy, unreliable son and jester" and Claudius as "a modern villain" (Kawachi, 2005: 68). Shakespeare's imaginary, then, became during these first decades of the 20th century a feature of Japan's cultural identity; having successfully entered into a **reconfiguration** stage, it inspired many directors, novelists and poets while remaining a 'fresh' creative force on its own due to the string of translations that eventually led to the publication of the entire plays in Japanese in 1928. Carried out by Professor Soyo, these versions "used words both old and new, elegant and vulgar, native and exotic, so long as they conformed to the grammar of colloquial Japanese in the ordinary sense of the term and could be understood by the average person by sound alone" (Minoru, 1940: 118):

paralleling what Constance Garnett's Chekhovian translations did by giving the Russian author an 'British' voice, Soyō offered the Bard a local linguistic energy that promised to last for many years.

The historical developments of the 1930s and 1940s, however, seemed to lead to an entirely opposite development: "as Shingeki became more political and more realism-orientated, (...) Shakespeare became less fashionable and finally the outbreak of the Second World War extinguished any possibility of producing plays deriving from what were then hostile countries" (Kishi & Bradshaw, 2005: 74). The mentor and inspirer suddenly became a polarising and attacked figure; subjected to another, harsher process of *re-evaluation*, he was turned again in this context of political confrontation into an alien form whose dramatic position within the country was severely undermined. This period, though, proved to be a short interlude that was eventually succeeded by a second, even stronger *reconfiguration* stage that reinforced Shakespeare's recognition within the country: during the late 1940s and early 1950s, when Japan was governed by an international coalition and its national identity was going through a period of intense questioning and re-elaboration, the English author served as an intercultural bridge between so-called Western values and local forces.¹⁶⁷ A particularly relevant example is the 1955 production of yet another *Hamlet*, translated and directed by Fukura Tsuneari (1912-1994). As part of the Shingeki school of drama, but at the same time conscious of the naivety and ponderousness of some pre-war productions, he almost abandoned "the preoccupation with modern realism – which was then so frequently combined with socialist commitments" (Kishi & Bradshaw, 2005: 31). Instead, he chose "lively and fast-moving" style, where rather than "trying to probe a character's psychological motivation" he

¹⁶⁷ It could be argued that Shakespeare's pre-eminence in the subsequent years was the result of a cultural imposition forced upon the Japanese by the Allied forces; it is undeniable that these years led to processes of cultural hybridisation that were not completely balanced. However, the strong presence of his plays in the country before its militaristic ventures of the 1930s and early 1940s, as well as the economic and artistic triumphs that some local adaptations and productions had since the 1950s, indicate that his return to the national stage was also due to an ingrained respect for and interest in his aesthetic style.

“preferred to examine or work from whatever part the character was expected to play in a particular scene” (Kishi & Bradshaw, 2005: 31). This emphasised the contradictions and emotional clashes between the characters, and offered to audiences a performing style that even though it did not return to the exuberant theatricality of traditional styles such as kabuki certainly embraced some of its ‘operatic’ sensibilities. The result was then an intercultural hybrid that reinvigorated the tradition of Shakespearean productions, just like the 1970s and 1980s generations of British directors and authors did to the ‘established’ nostalgic readings of Chekhov.

The combination of styles was preserved in many pieces that were created throughout the following years: Yushi Odashima “translated all of Shakespeare’s plays in colloquial style, and Norio Deguchi performed them at a small underground playhouse” (Kawachi, 2005: 69), emphasising not the epic elements of the plays but their dramatic intensity. Also, Japanese cinema produced movies that mixed the Bard’s creations with local styles: Akira Kurosawa’s 1957 *Throne of Blood*, for example, eliminated any possible “suggestion of a sacred and benign ‘Order’ reasserting itself” at the end of the play, and offered instead a “peculiar bleakness” and a “chilling distance from its characters” that owed “in visual as well as conceptual terms to Noh drama and the Buddhist concept of *mu*, or nothingness, which is not a large growth but a starting point” (Kishi & Bradshaw, 2005: 127-128). In general, these productions used Shakespeare’s plays as aesthetic vessels through which local audiences saw recovered, preserved and/or renovated theatrical traditions; at a time of socio-economic transformations, that saw Japan become one of the most promising emergent economies in the world, the Bard was turned into an intercultural weapon that combined technical improvements with a strong link to the creative past of the country.

Alongside this trend –which, just like Chekhovian reinterpretations that transplanted the stories to British lands, continues until the present–, it must be mentioned too the presence of a series of

avant-garde productions that, although still based in local re-understandings of the English author, also offered less of a 'nationalistic' rewriting of the author and more of a deconstructed, abstract and/or neo-colonial understandings of his work. Their existence was triggered by the arrival of early-1970s foreign Shakespearean productions that toured Japanese lands, such as Peter Brook's iconic version of *Midsummer's Night Dream*, presented in Tokyo, Osaka, Kobe and Nagoya between 3 and 24 May 1972 (Theatricalia, 2016). Its reinterpretation of the story, with its simplified and contemporary staging, raw sensuality and circus interludes, created a profound impact on local dramatic circles that can be compared to that of Krejca's *Three Sisters* in 1960s Britain; it maintained alive the **re-evaluation** stage, reminding the variety of readings of the Bard's plays still not explored in Japan, and initiated **exportation** processes among local companies that took their shows to international audiences. A good example of this result is the *NINAGAWA Macbeth*, premiered in Japan and then taken to Edinburgh and Amsterdam in 1985, where "the dramatic world of *Macbeth* was presented as a play-within-a-play", with Macbeth changed "into a samurai" and the witches performed by "three male actors because Ninagawa [the director] wished to use the acting style of female impersonators in Kabuki" (Kawachi, 2005: 69); by combining all these techniques, which separated audiences from any emotional naturalism and emphasised the theatricality of the event, the show proposed an analytic understanding of the story that underlined its main themes.

The Bard was by this time an almost limitless inspiration for authors, allowing a diversity of readings that went from realistic to avant-garde. By the end of the 20th century it was even possible to see productions like Ong Ken Sen's 1997 *Lear*, premiered in Japan but headed by a Singaporean director¹⁶⁸, where "the players of different nationalities [spoke] their own languages on the stage", and "modern music played on folk instruments such as the Indonesian gamelan and the Japanese

¹⁶⁸ The show started with a Japanese tour to Tokyo, Osaka and Fukuoka, before embarking into an Asian-European tour to Hong Kong, Singapore, Jakarta, Berlin and Copenhagen (Mit Global Shakespeares, 2016).

hiwa" (Kawachi, 2005: 71): a multicultural and multilingual show that underlined the intercultural possibilities offered by the playwright. It was the latest stage in a process of reception and reinterpretation that, as the previous pages demonstrated, was characterised by various stages of development; stages whose extension was unequal, and that in themselves revealed the difficulties that exist in the adoption of a dramatic discourse by a 'foreign' society.

And what about the 'external' and 'internal' factors? Does Shakespearean discourse in Japan fulfil at least some of the elements pointed out above as useful to create processes of reception and reinterpretation? A brief re-consideration of aesthetic and historical elements can help to answer this question. Starting with the internal factors:

1. **Inter-cultural dialogue:** plays like *The Tempest*, *Midsummer's Night Dream* or *The Merchant of Venice* are constructed around the clash of different cultural approaches.
2. **Inter-class dialogue:** *King Lear* or *Hamlet* present strong dramatic expressions of the connections or disagreements between classes, as well as the difficulties of class mobility.
3. **Inter-gender dialogue:** *The Taming of the Shrew* contradictory gender politics express psychological patterns of feminine oppression and control; Desdemona, Bianca and Emilia soliloquies, as well as their interactions with powerful male figures such as Othello, Iago and Cassio, propose various understandings of romantic relationships, desire and jealousy.
4. **Inter-race dialogue:** one of *Othello*'s main dramatic cores is the racial division between the protagonist and the remaining characters. Also, *The Merchant of Venice* is built around a powerful Jewish-Christian rift.

5. **Linguistic diversity:** all the aforementioned plays, among many others, present a rich mixture of prose and verse, as well as 'high' and 'low' registers of speech and communication.

And regarding the external factors:

1. **A culturally open and/or transitional historical period:** Japan at the end of the Tokugawa era and beginning of the Meiji restoration; or just after the end of World War II.
2. **A receptive and/or economically resourceful intelligentsia:** intellectuals and translators like Charles Wirgman, Fukura Tsuenari or Yushi Odashima considerably helped in the recognition and expansion of the Bard in Japan.
3. **Local generations of interpreters, actors and/or playwrights interested in the dramatic discourse:** directors such as Hikoze Katsu, Ii Yoho or Akira Kurosawa successfully staged Shakespeare's plays, shaping the way he was interpreted within the country.
4. **A critical audience:** Japanese audiences enthusiastically received Shakespeare from its original staging onwards, as it can be seen in the myriad of *Merchant of Venice* or *Hamlet* productions that were presented at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.
5. **A period (or periods) of socio-economic stability:** Shakespeare's original expansion at the end of the 19th century paralleled the successful economic expansion of the Meiji Era; also, his reestablishment in the 1950s and early 1960s coexisted with the post-war Japanese economic miracle.
6. **A penetration of the discourse beyond translations and adaptations:** novels like *Claudius' Diary* and *New Hamlet* reveal how the Bard inspired many local artists not long after its original reception.

As it can be seen, then, the development of the Shakespearean discourse followed throughout the years a process of adaptation and reinterpretation that, although not identical to that of Chekhov in the UK, certainly followed the stages of the previously presented outline; and, as the abovementioned Ong Ken Sen's production of *Lear* can attest, it has now reached a point where – similarly to British Chekhov's case with productions such as *Before I sleep* – it can be used to explore intercultural connections and reveal multifaceted (and perpetually incomplete) notions of national identity.

It could be argued, in fact, that this incompleteness is –or should be– the most important part of all adaptation and reinterpretation processes, due to its recognition of the fluidity of social identities, and its acceptance that a unique reading of a dramatic discourse cannot be the centre of all stagings. Regarding the specific case of foreign aesthetic discourses, an unfinished quality also reveals how harmful the monolithic assimilation of an author can be; through an intercultural approach, instead, where both sides are equally respected and embraced, and the original 'strangeness' of the dramas is used by new creators as a challenge and an inspiration, the aesthetic discourse can reach its maximum potential. Also, it serves as a final test for any author's work: depending on its capacity to face different interpretations, it can either be accepted or rejected by younger generations and upcoming cultural groups, who reflect historical transformations, new aesthetic preferences and changes in audiences' expectations.

This clash of options indicates too how the stage is a mirror of society: in the particular case of the UK at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, it serves as a timely reminder of the challenges faced in the construction of a stable social identity. Perhaps the answer, just like in the stage, is based not on the imposition of one discourse above another, but in the recognition and explicit reinforcement of an intercultural communicative process, where all social groups not only co-exist

next to each other in unresolved tension –the main flaw in the construction of a *multicultural* society– but also communicate with each other. But in order to present this in more depth it is necessary to return at this point to the main theoretical pillars of this thesis –that is, interculturalism and national identity–, and see how the progression of Chekhovian productions presented throughout the past chapters suggests the blossoming of a new conception of society.

4. Intercultural identities: a redefinition of British national identity

Alongside every production presented throughout this work, implied in the way they were staged and performed, there was always a desire to express the meaning (or meanings) of British national identity. After all, due to their variety of interpretations and their penetration all around the country, Chekhovian productions served as ideal platforms to express many different ways to conceive the UK: whether it was a desire to look back towards a ‘glorious’ past of Empire and aristocracy, to explore what could foreign voices reveal about the nation’s connection to the globalised world, to highlight those voices that had been previously silenced, or to review the clash and noise of many voices coexisting together, the Russian author became a vessel of the nation’s contradictions, hopes and expectations.

But was it possible to establish a dialogue between all these voices? Could the country embrace and combine such diverse points of views without encountering divisions or even outright confrontations? After all, the challenges presented in the 2009-2011 stagings analysed in the past four chapters continued in the following five years: Scotland’s questioning of its own identity, as captured for example by John Byrne in his *Cherry Orchard* adaptation, led to the subsequent discussions on devolution and the failed 2014 independence referendum; the relationship between Russian oligarchs and London persisted in their purchase of luxury houses that starkly contrasted

with the housing crisis faced by the city; and the Babelian and culturally challenging clashes of multilingual voices suggested by *Before I sleep* echoed the immigration debate and the uncertainties about European integration that marked 2016's Brexit campaign. It seemed, in short, that the socio-political problematics presented in the Chekhovian productions were still very much part of the nation's fabric; and even though these shows positively revealed that the country was still a place of multivalent voices and discourses –specially at a time when jihadist or ultra-nationalistic voices threatened to return to more extremist and monolithic readings of identity– they also revealed a polarisation between genders, races and generations that asked for further methods of dialogue and communication.

As mentioned in the introduction of this work, a previously well-regarded solution to these challenges, multiculturalism, was also under attack. Despite years of British legislation directly or indirectly attempting to accommodate different religions and ethnic groups within the same geographic construct, defending the right to be different as long as a basic social contract was accepted, the arrival of both EU and non-EU immigrants, “significant levels of inequality, racism, community tensions (...), continued emotional resistance to diversity and a desire to halt or reverse the trend” seemed to have taken the project to a critical situation (ICoCo, 2012: 12). Although the country's situation was not as openly violent as in other areas of the continent, which were dealing (for example) with the terrorist attacks due to the radicalisation of their nationals, there was no doubt –as the post-Brexit turmoil indicated– that there existed an internal rift between some urban and rural areas and ‘national’ and ‘foreign’ citizens. The idea that coexistence and a presumed equality of all religious and ethnic affiliations would lead to the establishment of social bonds seemed to be problematised.

Other possible options, as seen in other European territories, did not seem to be so encouraging either. Policies of assimilation, which attempted to encompass all citizens living within a geographical construct with perceived common pillars of identity, were confronted by internal social atomisation and a rise of extremist movements. France was a representative example: despite building a social identity around the *liberté, égalité, fraternité* motto, “a brotherhood that erases all differences to create the ‘French people’” (Gest, 2015), an increased number of radicalised nationals (connected to internationalist jihadist organisations such as ISIS) led a series of deadly terrorist attacks against innocent civilians in concert venues and recreational beaches, as part of a ‘crusade’ against ‘infidels’ in a battle for Islamic domination. Parallel to this, right-wing political forces criticised plurality laws, underlining their presumed ineffectiveness to avoid terrorism and suggesting that a “policy of ‘national preference’ giving priority to French nationals in the areas of housing and employment” (Marchese, 2015) and an encouragement of ‘traditional’ values was the only solution to safeguard an ‘established’ notion of national identity.

There was, then, an attack from different social sides on any attempt to build cultural communication; unfortunately, political strategies proposed to create a sense of commonality, not only in France but also in Britain, simultaneously showed their fallibilities. Multiculturalism was not as equitable as promoted, isolating classes, cultures and ethnic groups in urban or regional ghettos that were ideal platforms for religious and/or political extremisms, as well as initiators of intolerance to different perspectives. Meanwhile, assimilation implied a unique notion of identity that all citizens were supposed to follow, which diffculted the expression of a variety of viewpoints and the reaching of consensus on religious and/or cultural matters. In a few words, both approximations (and their expression in art such as drama) did not truly address the inherited imbalances between cultural discourses, avoiding a comprehensive and effective discussion of any nation’s structuring. Instead, selected forces that had a stronger historical presence, more economic power, or a

combination of both, preserved and/or expanded what they saw as the 'essence' of each society's identity, even if this meant the rejection or erasure of other valuable imaginaries.

There were, it's true, some attempts to rebalance this matter and find solutions that could create more encompassing notions of national identity. Germany, for example, saw in May 2016 the approval of an integration law that aimed to increase the possibilities of asylum seekers –coming from war-torn areas such as Syria, Libya or Iraq– to integrate into German society. Some of the key components of the law were the expansion of courses on German language, "culture, society and values", the creation of "100,000 low-wage jobs paying around one euro an hour", the relaxation of "existing labor laws (...) to encourage German companies to hire refugees" and the promise of permanent residency "after five years" to those migrants "proficient in German" and capable to provide "for their own upkeep in Germany" (Kern, 2016). The move was signalled by Chancellor Angela Merkel as a legislative milestone, valuable not only for the country itself but also as an example for other European countries such as the UK; a first step that, allied with a series of agreements with the Turkish government, was supposed to lead to a decrease in cultural clashes and a more peaceful and productive coexistence of cultural forces. These expectations, however, were criticised from different angles of the political spectrum: right-wing commentators considered it a permissive approach that allowed too many people to stay in the country, presumably continuing (as central banker Thilo Sarrazin put it) with Merkel's lack of concern "about the interests of Germans and the future of their nation, the protection of their living environment and their cultural identity" (Kern, 2016); meanwhile, the left saw it as a cynical attempt "to exploit the refugees in order to expand the low wage sector", all while restricting their right to freedom of movement which "will drive [them] into isolation and exclusion and increase their dependence on social services" (Kreickenbaum, 2016). Leaving aside the validity of these opinions, it was undeniable that even the most 'advanced' public regulations on integration –a subject that did not even have a

basic national guideline in British lands— was still not sufficiently advanced to deal with the challenges of socio-cultural communication present within geographic constructs such as the UK.

At this point, then, it is inevitable to reconsider one of the pillars of this work: interculturalism. Could it be useful as a bridge between communities? To answer the question, it is important to return to the definition of the term offered in the introduction: “*processes, circulations of energy, in which previously marginalised cultures are seen to work together rather than against, constructing genuine, rhizomatic, and multiple interculturalities that respect difference while building solidarities*” (Knowles, 2010: 61). The implications of this understanding were certainly promising: not only it had communication as a theoretical core, but also recognised –as the *Institute of Community Cohesion* (later on renamed as *Centre for Trust, Peace, and Social Relationships*) of Coventry University indicated– that “a fixed conception of culture is a fairly useless exercise, making some communities even more isolated from the real world and the likelihood [of] even greater change more sudden and difficult” (iCoCo, 2012: 61). The use of the term ‘intercultural’, then, revealed that it was not only necessary to establish dialogues between cultural groups, but to work towards the creation of new identities that were essentially *liminal*: rather than to keep cultures ‘as they were’, preserving a fictional ‘purity’ and ‘perfection’, the goal was to identify and encourage (through different ways including theatre) hybrid mixtures that could be part of an ever-changing redefinition of identity.

Criticisms of this model were already presented in the introduction: it can be recalled how interculturalism was used in Quebec to signify an assimilationist project that defended local values and established cultural traditions from what was considered an imposing Canadian nationalist discourse. Although this is clearly not the meaning of interculturalism proposed here, the fact that it was redefined to express such policies suggested the risks of using it to preserve certain socio-cultural perspectives without meaningful dialogical processes. In an everyday situation, after all,

interculturalism must face a myriad of economic and political forces which position some discourses above others and influence how each culture is embraced and recomposed: taking into consideration the ruthless neoliberalism of global economic centres, or the rise of religious or right-wing extremisms in different societies, there is the risk of seeing or applying interculturalism as a neo-colonial method to exploit and manipulate minorities while at the same time pretending to put them into dialogue with 'mainstream' discourses. If that is the case, however, it must be pointed out that a 'real' interculturalism, if it is to be embraced by a specific society (or if it is to become the centre of any governmental policy), must distinguish the presence of these discursive inequalities and provide spaces (such as theatre) where ethical communication can take place. Also, it is the responsibility of all members of society to face these challenges and accept a more equal negotiation where many views are considered and analysed in a context of openness and mutual respect; only after this takes place a truly plural and equal society will start to develop.

The notion of British national identity, therefore, should not be considered anymore –as so many theatrical examples above suggested– as a solid construct whose main pillars are built around a specific series of 'traditions'. If the country wants to successfully navigate around its own growing cultural diversity, at a time of Brexit uncertainties, the solution will not be found in a nostalgic return to the past and a monolithic imposition of limited discourses over internal and international forces: the only outcome of this decision would be isolationism, a weakening of social bonds and an incapacity to deal with the inevitable consequences of globalisation. Instead, this conclusion proposes that Britain should pursue two basic goals:

- 1. Replace singular definitions of identity for plural understandings:** rather than to understand itself as a country possessor of one definite identity, or as a space where different voices coexist in uneasy tension, the UK should be defined as a hybrid construct

with many parallel and intertwined *identities*, each one in constant flow and with multiple and ever-changing faces. To preserve this communication throughout the years, a constant and active creation of spaces appropriate for the establishment of new liminal 'intercultures' is required; theatre, as a social art built around dialogue, conflict and understanding, can fulfil a seminal role both in the redefinition of canonical discourses and in the construction of new ones.

2. **Transform 'British national identity' into 'British intercultural identities':** interculturalism should not be considered as a minor tool to be applied on specific scenarios; it should become instead a governmental policy that *defines* national identities. Through this perception it will be possible to: a) recognise the constructed, changing and liminal qualities of all cultural discourses; b) accept the inherent weight and value that they have for specific populations; c) incentivise the (anyway inevitable) evolution of cultures in a space of dialogue and understanding, which will prevent the strengthening of extremisms on all sides and build strong social bonds among future generations; d) establish humanistic links that go beyond the hierarchical organisation imposed by predatory economic policies; and e) build social and aesthetic platforms to discover similarities and differences between cultural discourses, which can help to establish a more stable society.

In order to reach these goals, the UK does not have to implement new and expensive methods to permit these intercultural encounters: it can re-use resources that –due to historical or cultural reasons– are already highly recognised and accepted. Due to its widespread local reach and recognition, theatre has the potential to become one these central platforms; and Chekhov, as one of the most reinterpreted dramatists of the country, to be (even more than now) one of the most useful authors to express new notions of identity. After all, as the present thesis already established,

by the turn of the first decade of the 21st century his plays were already capable to withstand all different kinds of readings, while at the same time becoming the inspiration of new playwrights, directors and actors. Perhaps the example set by productions such as *Chekhov in Hell* or *Before I sleep* was one worth to be considered: beyond their particular re-interpretation of the Russian author and his dramas, they had the capacity to propose important questions that audiences connected to their own search for identity. Such is the ultimate power of theatrical art: its capacity to transcend and, through its voices, dialogues and oppositions, become an ideal intercultural vessel to express perpetually changing forces and suggest how specific questions about the self and the nation can be constantly asked and reinterpreted.

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